

-Transmission Lost-
-Prayers of the Refugee-
Chapter Three: Closer
by Havoc

“Sorrow happens, hardship happens. To hell with it. He who never knew the price of happiness will not be happy.”

- Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Jack was thrown, rather unceremoniously, from his feet and onto a hard, warm stone floor. He cried out in pain as his shoulder hit the stones, and he rolled to a stop against a sandy wall. Hauling himself up, he put his back against the wall, looking towards the door he had just been thrown through. The Ailians who had been “escorting” him looked at him briefly, and then the door clanked shut, leaving him in relative darkness.

Groaning, Jack rubbed his shoulder, a dull ache still throbbing there as well as in his leg. Though the Ailian medics on board the rescue ship had treated the injuries he'd sustained on the uncharted planet, he still was not fully healed. At least he wasn't dead. This seemed like the longest day of his life, and it still wasn't over. When he thought about what was likely to happen next, and what had already happened, Jack could hardly believe it...

After being taken off of the Ailian ship, Jack had been transported away from the Mat'aar Airbase in a wheeled ground transport, guarded by a small squad of Ascendancy soldiers. They wouldn't tell him where they were going, but Jack remembered what Li'ren had said to him back on the ship several days ago. The most likely outcome for him, since he couldn't tell them any useful information, was that he would be made a slave. From what Jack understood, this was the common practice for human civilians who were captured.

The ride in the transport lasted for nearly an hour. There were no windows for Jack to see out of, so he had no idea of what might be outside. He knew it was probably desert, especially since air conditioning seemed to be a low priority for Ailian military vehicles. The temperature inside the transport was brutal, and Jack soon found himself wishing for a drink of water. Thankfully, they didn't seem to want him to die. When one of the soldiers noticed how much the human was sweating, he opened a compartment in the wall of the transport and withdrew a small flask of water, which he handed to Jack. That helped for a little while, but it was still tough going. At least they'd taken the restraints off of him, letting his arms free. His wrists had been getting a little sore.

When the vehicle came to a halt, Jack was full of a sense of uncertain terror. He had no idea

what exactly to expect, but he had a feeling that he wouldn't like it, no matter what it was. One of the soldiers with him opened the hatch to the vehicle, and sunlight flooded the interior, along with a new wave of desert heat. Jack craned his neck, trying to see outside, and what he saw was a surprise. He'd expected to see expanses of sand and barren landscape, but instead he was greeted by short, green grass and tall, thin trees that seemed similar to Earth palm trees. In the background he saw tall buildings, and he realized that they must be at the city, Hayikwiir, that had been mentioned to him earlier. They seemed to have stopped near the outskirts, in a small complex of buildings that looked kind of like a marketplace.

"Out," the squad leader said to him. She rose from her seat, stepping out of the hatch and then turning to reach back in. She grabbed Jack's right arm, jerking him out of his seat. He was starting to get tired of all this manhandling, and his frustration finally boiled over.

"Goddammit, stop treating me like an animal!" he yelled at the female. He lashed out with his free left hand, clenching his fingers into as tight a fist as he could manage and socking the Ailian right in the jaw. She lurched back from him, uttering a startled yowl of pain. One of the other soldiers half rose from his seat, and Jack shot his elbow back, catching him square on the nose and rocking him back.

"*Se na po'krai!*" the squad leader snarled. She grabbed Jack by his neck and yanked him out of the transport before he could do anything else. Spinning him around, she slammed him back against the side of the vehicle one, two, three times, until stars exploded in his eyes. The Ailian let him go and he dropped to the ground, dazed. "*Lek te pa'na!*" She drew her leg back, preparing to kick him.

"*Na la!*"

The squad leader stopped, teetering a little on one leg, before putting her foot down and turning away. Jack looked up, trying to blink the spots out of his vision and doing his best not to pass out. He saw a female Ailian walking towards them. She seemed shorter than most he had seen before, closer to human height, and she was a lot fatter than any he had seen. Obviously she was not a soldier, and he would have been surprised if she ever had been. She was wearing what he took to be casual clothing, a short sandy tan wrap skirt and a tan top that wrapped around her upper body, leaving much of her belly and shoulders bare, and exposing a good deal of her dark brown fur. The clothes made sense for a desert environment for a furred species, and were probably much more comfortable than the military uniforms the soldiers were wearing.

The female walked up to Jack and the squad leader, and she knelt next to him, straightening him up. When she spoke next, she spoke in English. "She hurt you badly?"

Still a little dizzy, but otherwise feeling alright, Jack shook his head. "No, I...I don't think so..."

“Good,” the Ailian said. She smiled at him. “She damage my merchandise, I very upset.” The brown female stood back up, and said something to the squad leader that sounded very angry. The other Ailian stiffened, looking abashed, and she nodded. Jack felt strong arms lift him up to his feet, and he managed to keep his balance.

At a gesture from the short female, two soldiers marched Jack towards one of the nearby buildings. Inside, Jack saw what looked, ludicrously, like a livestock stable at a county fair. The area was one large room, divided by metal bars into individual stalls. In each stall, though, instead of farm animals, were people. Mostly humans, though there seemed to be a few Ailians scattered here and there as well.

Jack had been taken to a slave market, just as Li'ren had foretold.

Jack was taken through the building, the group he was with making their way through the stalls and towards the rear of the large room. He looked from side to side as he went, looking at all of the slaves for sale. The humans stared back at him, obviously curious about him, but they didn't say anything. The Ailian slaves just ignored him. Buyers were walking here and there, going into stalls occasionally to examine slaves more closely, exactly like how someone might examine a horse or a cow for sale. It was all very disconcerting.

The brown-furred female, who was apparently the owner of the market, led them to a separate room, which was set up like an office. There the soldiers parted ways with them, and the slave dealer sat down behind a desk. Two other Ailians, presumably employees, showed Jack to a simple chair in front of the desk and then took up guard positions near the door.

“So...,” the dealer said, leaning forward at her desk. “Welcome to my market. I am Pe'lia, and you now my property.”

Thoroughly confused and a little overwhelmed, Jack wasn't sure what to say. “...Okay?” He looked around the room, trying to see if there might be a way out. But there were no windows, and no doors other than the one he had come in by.

Pe'lia smiled at him. “There no reason to be so scared. I treat my slaves well, until they sold. Not my problem after that.” She shuffled through a few papers on her desk, then clasped her hands together. “We start, yes? What kind of skills you have?”

“Skills?” Jack blinked. “I'm a pilot. That's all I really know how to do.”

The Ailian clucked her tongue, shaking her head a little. “That not do at all...No slave allowed to fly...” She stood up, looking him over and coming around her desk. She walked around Jack, her eyes scanning up and down his body. “You seem fit enough...Strip.”

Jack looked up at her, arching an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“Take you clothes off. Want good look at you.”

“Fuck off!” Jack snapped, not liking that idea at all. “You want me to strip, you're gonna have to do it first, you crazy bitch!”

He was instantly reprimanded by a strong smack to the face from Pe'lia. She came around to stand in front of him, leaning back against her desk and crossing her arms. Her expression had darkened considerably.

“Not like beating slaves, but not above doing it,” she warned him, waving a finger at him. “This much easier if you just do what I say, yes?”

“Well, tough shit, I'm not taking off my clothes for anybody!” Jack rubbed his face where she'd smacked him, feeling the heat from the blood rushing to the surface of his skin.

Pe'lia sighed, then she nodded to her two employees. Before Jack could react, one of them grabbed his arms and held them behind his back in a very strong grip. As Jack struggled fruitlessly, the other quickly and efficiently stripped his clothes off of him. When he was completely naked, they stood him up, keeping a firm hold of him. Pe'lia then began inspecting him very closely, muttering in her own language as she did so. Not having much of a choice, Jack was forced to tolerate her inspection, his face reddening.

When she cupped a hand over his groin, however, that was a little too much for him, and he tore one arm out of a guard's grip to swat at Pe'lia's hand. “Hey, keep your fucking hands to yourself!” he yelled. That earned him a second rough smack to the face.

“You learn respect,” Pe'lia cautioned him. She sighed, shaking her head. “Too spirited...Not like that. But maybe you valuable for breeding...” She sat back down behind her desk, nodding to the guards. “*Le ke'li te maz'te a'nala.*”

One of the guards handed Jack his clothes. He snatched them away, furious, and got dressed as quickly as he could. When he was dressed again, he sat back down, staring daggers at Pe'lia. He wanted nothing more than to jump across that desk and strangle her with his bare hands, but he was wary of the two guards, and the memory of how the soldier outside had dealt with his rebellion was fresh in his mind. The last thing he wanted was to get his head bashed in for his troubles.

“Now, you too wild to put on display...,” Pe'lia said, leaning back in her seat. “But I add you to catalog anyway. Meantime, you go down below. Few days in confinement soften you up, I think.” She waved a hand to her employees. One of them produced a collar, placing it around Jack's neck and fastening it securely. The collar seemed to be made of some sort of leathery material, and it had a small metallic stud on the front of it that he guessed was some kind of tracking device. Then the guards grabbed Jack, hauling him off his feet. They dragged him out of the room, back out of the building, and

to a smaller building next door, where a long staircase led below ground...

Now that he'd been down in the darkened room for a little while, Jack's eyes started to adjust to the gloom. He could very slowly start to see around him, though it was still too dim to really make out any details. He didn't even want to stand up, so he just rested his head against the stone wall. His hand came up to finger the collar around his neck. The thing wasn't tight, but it was sufficiently strange enough to him that it was uncomfortable. He wasn't sure exactly how it had been fastened, but running his fingers around it he couldn't feel a seam, so he imagined there wasn't any way to easily remove it. Jack tried not to think about it. Whenever he thought about his situation, it just depressed him even more. Especially since, he now figured, he wasn't ever going to get see Aria again.

"Hello?"

Jack nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard the voice. He looked around, but couldn't see much further than a few feet away because of how dark the room was. He half thought he might have imagined the voice, but it had sounded very real, and it sounded human. "Is...someone else there?"

"Yes..." A shuffling sound was heard, and a figure crawled out of the darkness into Jack's field of vision.

It was a girl, a human girl. Jack couldn't see very much detail, but she looked younger than him. She might have been fifteen years old, he couldn't be sure. He hadn't seen another human in person since before he left Earth almost a month ago. The girl crawled close to Jack, and sat on the floor near his feet. He wasn't able to make out her face.

"My name's Brooke," the girl said. She had a very small voice, quiet but high pitched. "What's yours?"

"Uh...Jack..." he responded. "My name's Jack."

"I haven't seen another person in ages..." Brooke said. "Where are you from?"

"Earth," Jack said.

"Earth? What's that? I've never heard of that place...Is that a town?"

Jack was completely taken aback by that. "No, it's...It's a planet. Don't you know? That's where humans...we...come from."

"Oh," Brooke said, sounding apologetic. "I'm sorry, I...I didn't know that."

"No, it's okay," Jack assured her, not wanting to upset the girl. He paused for a moment.

"Er...so...Where are you from?"

Brooke's voice sounded a little distressed. "I...don't know. I can't remember that far back...The only place I've ever known I lived was here, on Lirna. I've always been a slave, so far as I can

remember.”

“Really?”

Jack felt a wave of pity wash over him. If Brooke couldn't even remember where she had been born, she must be a lot younger than he thought, perhaps as young as twelve or thirteen. The war had only lasted for about ten years, so far. Since Brooke had never heard of Earth, she must have been taken as a slave from a colony world before she was old enough to remember much of anything. This poor girl had been a slave for almost her entire life.

Jack changed the subject a little. “Why are you down here, Brooke? They put me here because I hit one of the Ailians...What did you do?”

“Oh...Well...I tried to run away.” Brooke sighed, and she seemed to draw herself into a tight ball where she sat. “My master kept beating me so I kept trying to leave. He didn't like that...Finally, I ran away so many times that he didn't want to bother with me anymore. So he sold me. And then I tried to run away from this place, so they put me down here.”

“That sucks,” Jack said. “How long have you been down here?”

“I'm not sure...A month, maybe? Whenever they take me out, I just try to run away again. So I think they're going to keep me here for a long time...I hate them. They're all terrible people.”

“I see.” Jack straightened his legs out, shifting a bit uncomfortably where he sat. He knew that Brooke's feelings were understandable, but he couldn't help but get a little annoyed by what she was saying. Sure, it was a little difficult to come up with a defense for Ailians now that he'd seen the slave market, but Aria was proof that they weren't *all* bad.

Brooke didn't make any more conversation for a while after that. Jack was starting to think she was finished talking to him, but then she spoke up again. “How did you get here?”

“That's...kind of a long story,” Jack muttered.

“Tell me, please,” Brooke pleaded with him. “It's just...It's been so long since I got to talk to another person...”

Jack rubbed the back of his neck. “Alright, well...It all started with my job back on Earth...”

A few hours later, Jack had told Brooke the whole story, save for a few of the more salacious details that he didn't think were appropriate for a child. He'd also left out the exact nature of his relationship with Aria. He didn't think she would react very well to that, and he didn't want to upset the girl. As he finished up, he could tell she was sitting up straight, rapt with attention.

“You mean you're actually friends with one of them?” the girl asked, not sounding as though she was capable of believing something like that.

"Yeah...pretty much," Jack replied, evasively. He wondered if Brooke suspected he was lying a little, but he didn't think so. She seemed disbelieving enough of the possibility of a human and an Ailian having anything but hatred for each other.

Brooke shifted her position on the floor, crossing her legs. "But...she was mean to you when you met her. Why would you want to be friends after that?"

"It's not that I *wanted* to be friends with her," Jack said. He didn't really know how to explain it to Brooke. "It just...You don't really decide to be friends with someone. It's just something that happens. We had to survive, so we had to work together, so we grew to like each other."

"Oh..." Brooke seemed to think about that for a few moments. "I've never really had any friends, so I guess I don't know how it works. But she sounds like a good person, I guess."

"She took some getting used to," Jack admitted. "But, yeah...Yeah, I think she really is a good person. It's just that Ailians and humans are different. It's not bad to be different." He thought about what he'd just said for a minute. He really hadn't liked Aria when he'd first met her. She's been so abrasive, so abusive, and such a slave driver. However, he realized now that her behavior had been because she'd been just as scared as he'd been. She'd never spent much time in the company of humans before, as he understood it, so she'd behaved in the best way she'd thought to protect herself, and the way that she'd been trained.

"So...You've never had any friends?" Jack asked Brooke, curious. "Not a single one?"

"No."

"What about family? What about your mother and father?"

The girl was quiet for a while, and then Jack heard her give a little sniffle. "I...I don't know...I can barely remember them at all. I don't know if they're dead, or if they got sold, or what..." She buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking as she cried quietly.

"I...Sorry!" Jack said quickly. He reflected that he really wasn't good with kids at all. "I didn't mean to make you cry. I shouldn't have said anything!"

He watched Brooke as she cried for a few minutes, not sure what to do. He was afraid of making it worse, so he held his tongue, feeling terrible and awkward and wishing she would stop. Finally, after perhaps ten minutes, she calmed down, sniffing and wiping her face.

"It's...It's okay...", the girl said, sniffing loudly. "I cry sometimes. That was one reason why master beat me so much. So I try not to cry all the time, but sometimes I can't help it."

"Oh, it's...don't worry about it," Jack assured her. He reached out hesitantly, then patted her on the shoulder. "You said you tried to run away...Where would you run to? It's all desert out here."

"I dunno," Brooke said, shrugging. "Anything is better than being a slave, I guess. And there are

rumors. They say there's a place out there where other escaped slaves have gathered. That there's a city or a town of all slaves, living together and hiding from the masters. Maybe someday I'll get away, and find that place."

Jack smiled a little, even though she wouldn't be able to see it. The girl just seemed so sincere, it was impossible not to believe that she'd succeed eventually. "I'm sure you will..."

Suddenly, Jack's ears perked up. Faintly, he thought he could hear voices through the door, getting gradually closer. The speech sounded agitated, angry, and it was growing louder by the second. Though he still couldn't tell a whole lot of difference between Ailian voices, Jack though he could detect the speech of the slave dealer, Pe'lia. Whatever she was saying, she didn't seem to be very happy with the person she was talking to. And the person she was talking to sounded even less pleased, though that voice was more forceful. When the voices were loud enough that he was certain they were right outside the door, he heard a dull clunk as the lock disengaged.

The door opened, allowing light to flood into the room. His eyes hurting a little from the new light, Jack blinked a few times, then took the opportunity to get a look at Brooke. He had been right about how old she was. Jack would have been very surprised if she was much older than twelve or thirteen. She was short, and had dark, dark skin. Her hair was midnight black, long enough to reach the small of her back, with traces of gray that were doubtless from the stress of being a slave her whole life. Brooke looked back at him with large, piercing green eyes. Jack was struck with the idea that if she lived through being a slave, she would grow up to be a gorgeous woman.

Tearing his gaze away from the girl, he looked back to the doorway. Standing there, as he'd suspected, was Pe'lia. Beside her stood an Ailian that Jack hadn't seen before. A very tall female, she was dressed in a red military uniform exactly like the one Aria had worn, though it was in much better shape than the clothes Aria had been wearing. She had black fur spotted with white, and seemed much older than Aria.

"You have been claimed," Pe'lia said through gritted teeth. She shot a sideways glance at the soldier next to her, her expression suggesting murderous fury. The black Ailian didn't meet her look, instead gazing intently at Jack.

"Oh," he said blankly. "Really." A cold knot formed in the pit of his stomach. The black Ailian, whom he presumed had bought him, looked like a tough person. He didn't have a good feeling about being taken by her.

"Not just sit there!" Pe'lia snapped at him. She gestured at him. "Not waste my time. Get up and come!"

Carefully, with just enough delay to demonstrate his defiance, Jack stood up. He paused,

looking down at Brooke, not wanting to leave the girl alone again but not seeing much alternative. “Good luck, Brooke. Maybe I'll see you again.”

Brooke waved at him, her expression clearly showing her doubt at the likelihood of that prospect. “Okay. Bye...” She waved at him with one hand, then shuffled her way back to the corner she'd been sitting in when he arrived, huddling in a little ball there.

Turning away, Jack walked to the door and left the room, and Pe'lia closed and locked the door after him. The black Ailian placed a hand on his shoulder, gently but firmly urging him towards the stairs to take him up. He let himself be pushed along, though he was reluctant to leave the building now that he was certain that a life of slavery was what awaited him.

When they got up the stairs and back out in the daylight, Jack was greeted by the sight of two wheeled vehicles parked a short distance from the doorway. One of them was a military vehicle, though smaller than the one he had been brought to the slave market in. The other was sleeker, black, and looked remarkably like some kind of luxury car, though of course it was designed for Ailians and was much larger than a human car might have been. Standing beside this vehicle was a slightly built Ailian of average height, dressed in similar clothing to what Pe'lia was wearing, though her clothes were a soft green color. Her fur was a bright tiger orange with black stripes. She looked young to Jack, perhaps only just out of adolescence, though he couldn't really tell. When she saw Jack and the other Ailians step out of the building, she opened the door to the vehicle.

At an urging push from the black-furred Ailian, Jack walked to that vehicle. The orange-furred female gestured to the door. “Inside,” she said simply. Jack looked at her, his eyes narrowed, but there wasn't really anywhere to run to. Like he'd told Brooke, there was desert in three directions and a city full of enemies in the fourth. So he stepped into the vehicle, which seemed to be set up on the inside rather like a human-style limousine. There was a wall separating the passenger compartment from the front of the vehicle, where Jack assumed someone else was working as a driver.

Jack expected the black Ailian to step inside after him, but when he looked over his shoulder he saw her walking to the military vehicle. The tiger-striped Ailian stepped in instead, and shut the door. He was a little taken aback. “Hey, what's going-”

His voice was immediately cut off as something massive plowed right into him, knocking him off his feet and into one of the long couch seats that lined the perimeter of the inside of the vehicle. Before Jack could shout in alarm a pair of arms wrapped tightly around his body, and a pair of soft, familiar lips pressed against his.

“A-A-Aria?” Jack gasped, when his mouth was finally free.

“Jack...,” Aria said, leaning back and looking at him with sparkling eyes. Then she drew him

close to her once more, kissing him again.

“Oh, god, Aria...” Jack gladly returned the gesture, finally putting his arms around her and hugging as tight as he could. She wrapped her tail possessively around his waist, a thunderous purr vibrating through her chest.

“I think I never see you again...,” Aria breathed as their kiss broke. She clutched his head against her breasts, nuzzling the top of his head.

“You thought you'd never see *me*?” Jack asked, incredulous. “I was certain you were dead by now. What are you doing here?”

“Is long story...,” Aria said, looking down at him fondly. “I explain later, yes?”

Tearing his gaze away from her, Jack glanced over at the other Ailian in the vehicle, who was watching the entire exchange with wide eyes. Belatedly, he realized that, though his ability to distinguish between different Ailians was limited, she looked remarkably like Aria. Her eyes were almost identical, flecked with gold, though of a robin's egg blue color instead of the bright yellow of Aria's. Also belatedly, he realized it might not be the best thing for anyone else to see these displays of affection. He started to pull away from Aria, but she held him still. Then, to his surprise, the corners of the other female's mouth turned out, and she seemed to be laughing quietly.

“Is alright,” Aria explained. She held a hand out towards “Is Sami. My sister.”

“Your...oh...,” Jack said, though he was still uncertain. “Okay, but...is it still such a good idea to...You know...In front of her?”

“She already know,” Aria assured him. “No secrets between sisters. Nothing to worry about.”

“Right...Well, if you say so.” Jack extended a hand to Sami. “Pleasure to meet you, Sami. I'm Jack Squier. It's nice to finally meet some of Aria's family.”

Sami smiled at him, waving her tail in a friendly manner, but she glanced at Aria with an expression that suggested a bit of discomfort and awkwardness. Quickly, Aria said something to her in her own language, and she seemed to relax. Then she extended her own hand, grasping Jack's with a light grip.

“Sami not speak much human,” Aria told Jack. “I teach her a little, when I home on leave sometimes, but she still learning.”

“Oh, well,” Jack said, “maybe I can help out with that a little.”

“She like that, I think.” Aria leaned back in her seat, keeping one arm around Jack's waist. “*Ara te cha'kra ni ben, sami.*”

Sami nodded, and rapped on the front portion of the passenger compartment they were in. Jack felt the vehicle begin to move, and he tried to look out the darkened windows, but they were too tinted

for him to see much other than vague movement. From what he could feel, though, they were moving at a very high speed. The ground rumbled underneath them, as they were presumably traveling over the grassy and sandy ground, but that sensation was soon replaced by the smooth travel of a paved surface.

“Where are we going?” Jack asked. He was still intensely curious about the circumstances surrounding how Aria was able to take him like this, but he also sensed that she didn't want to talk about it right now.

“My family home,” Aria replied. “Will be staying there for a while. You like. Is nice little home.”

They rode in silence for the rest of the trip. Jack and Aria were perfectly content to just sit next to each other, her arm around him while he rested against her side. He noticed that she was still wearing her worn red flight suit. Jack thought about the clothes that Sami was wearing, and of course he couldn't help but imagine Aria wearing the same sort of thing. That thought was certainly a diverting one, and got him thinking about the sleeping arrangements while he was staying at Aria's family's home.

Speaking of sleep, Jack realized that he was really in need of some. He hadn't had a good night's sleep since before he and Aria had been rescued. He also was incredibly hungry. The last meal he'd eaten had been the day before on the Ailian ship, and you couldn't really call prison fare a meal. He wondered what sorts of things Ailians ate for dinner. He assumed, since Aria had been able to eat human food without any difficulty, that Ailian food would similarly be edible to him, but would it be appetizing or too different for him to deal with?

After a while, the vehicle slowed and then came to a stop. Sami moved from her seat and opened the door, stepping out. Aria took a moment to give Jack one more soft, tender kiss, and then she helped him out of the vehicle. When Jack got out and had a look at where they were, he felt his jaw drop.

In front of him was what he could only compare to a Spanish-style villa. A number of central buildings were organized in tiers, with verdant green gardens and ornamental trees filling the spaces between them. An artificial stream flowed down from the top to the bottom, splitting into branching waterfalls as the water flowed over each tier. The buildings themselves were gorgeous, constructed with what looked like some sort of sandy stone and decorated on the outside with red and blue tiles. Large windows of crystal clear glass went from the ground to the roof in many places on the buildings. This wasn't just a home, it was a palace!

“*This* is your family's home?” Jack gasped, his eyes as wide as saucers.

“Yes,” Aria said. She seemed a little surprised at her reaction. “I tell you before, I have large

family, yes? And I also tell you my father is merchant.”

“Yeah, but you didn't tell me he was successful enough for a place like *this*,” Jack breathed. He was starting to feel a little intimidated by the size of the place. Even in his wildest dreams, Jack had never imagined being rich enough to have a home like this.

Aria blinked at him, then she laughed lightly. “Well, come. We go inside.” She was looking a little anxious now. “I want to see father. Not see him in months.”

Sami was already halfway up a walkway leading to the lowest tier of buildings. Still slightly weak in the knees, Jack let Aria lead him along as they followed her. His head was spinning a bit. The only thing that he could think right now was that this was probably not the last surprise he was going to face on Lirna.