

-Transmission Lost-
-Prayers of the Refugee-
Chapter Four: Your Love
by Havoc

“One day we were brought into the world, knowing love only as being what we had for our toys, family, and friends. Then, you meet someone who alters your conception of love, and you never know how you loved anything before because this kind of love goes so far beyond anything you've ever known.”

- Unknown

The walk up to the front door of her family's expansive home was one of the longest walks Aria had thought she'd ever taken in all of her twenty-eight years. She barely noticed the tranquil beauty of the grounds, the soft rushing noise of the artificial stream down through the gardens of cultivated desert flowers and lush trees, with the pleasant heat of her home planet's sun, which was beginning to sink low in the sky. All she could think about was seeing her family again, none of whom she'd seen in nearly three months. Aria had been on her assignment for two months already when she'd first encountered Jack, and then there had been all the time she'd been lost on the planet they'd crashed upon. She had been very close with her family her entire life, especially her sister, Sami, and all the more since her mother's death. Not seeing them was the hardest part of her military service, and she was very eager for a reunion.

Jack walked beside her, more attentive to his surroundings, taking everything in. He'd never been the kind of guy who frequented gardens or parks or places like that, but now he was struck by the beauty of the place he found himself in. He almost didn't mind the heat of the planet now, or the brightness of the light around him. The area around him was a sea of green, full of grasses, flowers, and trees. A lot of work must have gone into maintaining a place like this in a harsh desert environment, and the sandstone construction of the dwellings gave the place the feeling of an old, classic villa. Jack decided that if he had to spend a time as a slave, he'd much rather spend it here with Aria than as a prisoner on an Ailian ship, or in the dungeon of a slave market.

“This place is gorgeous,” he said to Aria as they walked up the stone walkway leading to what seemed to be the main building, following Sami.

“Yes,” Aria replied absently, only half paying attention to him. Her sharp feline eyes were locked on the front door, her heart aching. “Was mother's dream, to have home like this. Father build it for her.”

Finally they came to the front entrance of the home. The doorway was tall, and the doors were heavy and made of a dark wood which had been sandblasted to be smooth as glass. Sami opened the

door, and Aria fairly ran inside, leaving Jack a few steps behind her. She vanished from his sight, and he heard a strangled cry from inside that startled him. Ushered inside by Sami, he walked into a large foyer. Two columns ran from floor to ceiling, and the floor was a marble-like stone polished to a high gleam. Jack was relieved to learn that air conditioning was not a thing unknown to Ailians, as the inside of the home was markedly cooler than outside.

His attention was drawn to the center of the entrance hall. There Aria stood, embracing another Ailian. This male was much older than she, his fur gray with traces of orange. This was clearly her father, and Jack could see Aria's shoulders shaking as she cried with happiness.

Jack stood there awkwardly, feeling like he was intruding on a private moment, and he waited for the reunion to conclude. After a few moments, Aria stepped back from her father, and they exchanged a few words. Then he left her, exiting the foyer to another part of the house while Aria turned and came back to where Jack and Sami were standing.

"I very happy see my father...," Aria said, as though apologizing to Jack. She wiped moisture from her eyes.

"It's alright," Jack said. He smiled at her, though he also felt a pang of jealousy. He'd never been close with his own family, and he was envious of her relationship with hers.

"*Sami, ma'ta lek a su'resh la, cha?*" Aria said to her sister, who nodded in return. Aria clasped her sister's arm briefly, and then put a hand on Jack's shoulder. "Sami show you to spare bedroom. Could use wash, new clothes, yes? We maybe not have much that fit you...but find something. Father say we have dinner soon. I go speak with him, join you after, yes?"

"Oh...Well..." Jack looked at Sami, who offered a friendly smile. He still felt uneasy around any Ailians who weren't Aria, but this was her family after all. "Alright, if you say so, Aria."

Perhaps seeing the wariness on his face, Aria leaned down and slid her hand around his back, hugging him to her for a moment. "Not worry," she assured him. "You see me again soon. Safe here." She squeezed him, then her voice became a bit stern. "You so brave when we meet. Not let that go. Need to be strong."

Jack laughed a little. "Brave. Right. Whatever you say."

Aria let him go, allowing her cheek to brush against his as she went. "*Se le ch'aa ara,*" she whispered, quiet enough for only him to hear. He recognized the phrase from before, when they'd been rescued on the alien planet. Though he couldn't understand the words, the way in which she said them filled him with warmth. The Ailian gripped his shoulder for a moment, and then she left him, tracing her father's steps through the door he'd left through.

When her sister had gone, Sami put a hand on Jack's arm. "Follow," she said. She spoke with a

heavy accent since, as Aria had explained, she evidently did not know much English. She led Jack out of the entrance hall, in a different direction from the one Aria and her father had taken. He followed her, looking this way and that as they walked through the palatial home. The place was simply but elegantly decorated, with silvery trim along the hallways. Pictures hung on the walls, some paintings of landscapes and still lifes while others were photographs of Ailians whom Jack assumed were family members. Some of the photographs seemed to be quite old, from what he could tell.

Jack was taken out of the main building, through the gardens and up a set of steps to one of the other buildings. While smaller than the one he'd just been in, this one also seemed to contain living quarters. He wondered if Aria's family kept any slaves, but he hadn't seen any other humans around, or any Ailians that wore collars similar to the one he now wore. Jack considered that a good sign, and one that made him feel a little better, though he was still full of fear and uncertainty at the situation he found himself in. It had fully sunk in that he was on the Ailian homeworld, quite truly the last place any human would want to be.

Sami showed him inside, where a hallway led to several rooms. She brought him to one, opening the door and ushering him in. Jack had been expecting sparse living conditions, befitting a slave, but he was pleasantly surprised. The room was furnished very well, with three dressers, a long armless couch, and a large, Ailian-sized bed. The human walked in, standing in the middle of the room, taking it all in.

“So...ah...is this where I'll be staying?” Jack asked. He looked at Sami.

The Ailian stared at him, seeming confused for a few seconds, but then her eyes flashed recognition and she nodded. “*Cha*...ah...Yes.” She fiddled with her fingers, seeming to be thinking very hard, apparently running through her sparse vocabulary of English. “Is...*pek'ta le na*...ah...guest room?” She looked towards the dressers, moving that way. “Clothes...”

Jack watched her as she opened and closed drawers, rummaging through their contents. She looked over at him, her eyes traveling up and down his body, seeming to size him up. Before long she had pulled out a number of garments. She brought these over to Jack and presented them to him, and he took them and held them up. They were Ailian-style clothes, and while they seemed a little big for him they were definitely close enough to work. The garments looked as though they had been worn before, though they were quite clean. He supposed they might have belonged to family members who had since outgrown them.

“Thank you,” Jack said gratefully. He was eager to get out of his borrowed, blood-stained black fatigues. He'd been wearing them for going on a week straight now, and they were growing decidedly uncomfortable.

Sami nodded to him, smiling a little. “*Zha la te'm ke...ah...*” She shook her head, looking a little cross with herself. “Bath. That way.” She gestured to a second door that led from the guest room. “Clean.”

Jack couldn't help but chuckling. Aria's sister was very clearly trying hard to make herself understood in English, and she was also doing her best to demonstrate her friendliness to him. He knew Aria had told her all about their relationship, and it was nice to have at least *one* person's approval. “Thanks. I probably don't smell all that great right now. I haven't had a proper bath in a long time.”

“I go...*pah*,” Sami cursed, growing frustrated. She searched for the proper words, closing her eyes as she calmed herself down. Jack thought he saw a little of Aria's temper present in her sister. “Go cook. I...*le na*...back later.” She gave him a little half bow, then took her leave.

Jack looked after her as the door closed. He sighed, grateful for her consideration but relieved to be alone now. Without further delay he got out of his dirty clothes and made for the door that Sami had indicated led to the bath, hoping that he could figure out Ailian plumbing well enough to take a nice, hot soak before dinner. He had the desire to make a good impression on Aria's family.

Huh..., he said to himself. *You know...This is the first time a girl has ever had me over for dinner with her family.* Jack had a good laugh at that thought.

Aria's father had told her to meet him in his study, so that was where she went when she left Jack and her sister. The room was towards the back of the main building of the family estate, and Aria remembered the way very well. As a young girl, she'd spent many afternoons on her father's lap, as he read to her from one of the many storybooks that had been her companions growing up.

When Aria opened the door to the study, memories came flooding back to her. The room was massive, high-ceiling, and paneled in dark wood imported from one of the forest colony worlds of the Ascendancy. Bookshelves lined the walls, and they in turn were full of hundreds of books. Her father had always preferred the feel of real paper in his hands, rather than reading from an electronic device. Looking around the room, she saw that her father was already sitting in one of the large, high-backed chairs that were scattered about the study. She made her way towards him, moving slower and less enthusiastically now. While she had been eager to see her father again before, now she knew that he wanted to have a conversation that she would rather avoid.

Arn Me'lia watched as his eldest child took a chair near to him. The older Ailian looked at her, staring her down. He knew that his daughter was far more formidable than he ever had been, perhaps even than her mother had been, but he had always been able to discipline her with firmness and surety. Aria rarely questioned her father's judgment, and on the few occasions that she had he'd been forced to

concede that her own judgment was correct. He had a feeling that this was to be one of the times she would question his judgment, but he was certain that this time he was not going to budge.

Before Aria could say anything to him, Arn spoke. <It's very good to see you, my daughter,> he said, favoring her with a warm smile. <When your commander came to us and told you that you'd been lost, we all thought...Well, it was like with your mother all over again. Sami was quiet inconsolable. You can't imagine how overjoyed we all were when we heard you'd been rescued.>

<Father, I->

<And then,> Arn continued, his smile turning to a frown as his ears flattened to the top of his head, <imagine how we felt when we heard you were being charged with treason. What would your mother say if she were alive today?>

Aria's ears drew back, and her head drooped to stare at the floor. Arn felt guilt at hurting his daughter with his disapproval, but he felt that she needed to hear these words. He still mourned for his mate, dead for three years, and he knew that she would have been gravely disappointed to learn what their daughter was charged with.

<And a slave!> Arn hissed, spearing her with an intense, angry look. <You know how your mother and I felt about slavery, even when they're those humans. And you bring a slave into our home...>

His daughter looked up at those words, her eyes blazing. <That's not...You don't understand, father! He's not a slave, he's-> She shut her mouth, looking away from her father. She'd almost said something that she hadn't meant to say.

Arn eyed her curiously, puzzled by her outburst. <There's a lot of talk going about,> he said, changing the subject. <We hear rumors from soldiers in the city, from some of my customers...The news about you being charged with treason is spreading fast.> He reached over to one of the bookshelves next to his chair, selecting a book. The elder Ailian opened it, glancing at the page he opened to, and then he tossed it aside. <Aria, what happened while you were away? Some of these rumors...They're a little hard to believe, and yet...>

<Oh, father...,> Aria whispered. She wasn't sure what rumors he might have heard, but she could certainly guess. Many of the soldiers who had been present for her rescue mission knew the exact nature of her charges, and of course some of them would have talked about it. But Aria didn't have the courage to come completely clean with her father. Not yet.

She took a deep breath. <Father, when I was out on patrol last, I ran into a human ship. We got into a fight out there, and it ran from me. I had to follow it blind. Both of our ships were badly damaged, and we crashed on an uncharted planet.> Aria looked at her father again, sitting up straight in

her chair. <I had to eject from my ship, and I was badly hurt in the crash. I needed treatment for my wounds and I drifted too far away from my ship to know where it was. I found the human ship first, and the pilot there was still alive. I captured him and forced him to help me.>

She waited a moment before continuing. <His ship was ruined, and I couldn't use it to escape the planet. I decided I had to find the wreck of my own ship. I thought I'd be able to use the radio inside to call for help, so I made the human come with me. I knew I wouldn't be able to survive on my own.>

Arn listened to his daughter carefully. He'd known that she wasn't going to react well to his words, but then he hadn't known the whole story of what had happened when she'd been lost. Now that he was hearing some details from her own mouth, he thought he might be beginning to understand a little bit about what had transpired while she was away. He nodded at her, gesturing with one hand for her to continue.

<Well...There were a lot of things I didn't count on,> Aria continued. <That planet was dangerous. There was this species of pack predator that began stalking us as we traveled. One of them attacked the human one night, and I had to fight it off. Then the next night, a pack of them attacked us both. I nearly died, father. But the human...he fought them off.> She glanced down, then back up at her father. <The human I brought here is the same one. I couldn't just leave him behind when they rescued me. He saved my life father, and they were going to turn him over to a slave dealer. I couldn't let them do that.>

Arn shook his head, looking off into space. <So they charged you with treason because you allied yourself with a human. Because you didn't want to die on some lost planet.>

<Well...> Aria hesitated. She didn't want to lie to her father, but she didn't feel comfortable telling him the whole truth just yet. Aria knew that her father had prejudices against humans, and had carried those prejudices ever since her mother had died in battle with human forces. She didn't know how he would react if he knew the full extent of what had happened to her on that alien planet. <Yes, father. That's why.>

<And so now he's your slave because you're grateful to him for helping you. You felt a need to save him as well. It's not because you wanted a slave.>

<No, father. Not at all.> That, at least, was the truth, even if it wasn't the whole truth.

Arn stood up from his chair, walking over to his favorite bookshelf, the one that held volumes upon volumes of history books. The businessman loved history even more than he loved his career as a food merchant, and he'd read each book on this shelf countless times. He stared at them now, and ran his fingers along a few of the leather bound spines. His tail waved behind him a few times as he mulled over the story that his eldest daughter had just told him.

<So does this...human...have a name?>

<His name is Jack Squier, father,> Aria replied. She gazed at her father's back, wondering what he would say next.

<Jack Squier...,> Arn repeated thoughtfully. He rested his hand on the spine of a particularly thick book, newer than many of the rest. This one had been a gift from his mate, the last gift she had ever given him before she died. <Well, if this human is one of the reasons you've been brought back safe to me, I suppose...I'm grateful to him.> He turned back to her, and his daughter saw the tears in his eyes.

<Father.> Aria stood up and went to him. He took her into his arms, hugging her quite tightly, feeling as though he would never let her go again.

<I never wanted this for you,> he said, his voice shaking. <Neither your mother nor I wanted this. We both wanted you to stay home, to take over the family business.>

<I know, father. I know.>

Arn let her go, holding her back from him at arm's length. He looked her up and down, taking in the sight of her beaten up uniform, of her fur in knots, and the faint bloodstains across her torso. <But your mother was so very proud of you anyway when you joined. I suppose I was, too.> And she could see the pride in his eyes, moreso for the fact that she had survived to come home. <I just don't want to lose you again...>

<You won't, father,> Aria insisted, heat coming into her voice now. She set her face in a brave expression. She had to have one for him. <I'll find a way to beat this.>

Her father seemed relieved to hear the conviction in her voice. <Good.> He stepped away from her, going back to his chair. <For now, your room has already been prepared. I saw to it as soon as we heard you'd been found. I think there's enough time for you to wash up and get into some decent clothes before dinner. I'll have Ana call you when it's ready.>

Jack had just finished washing up and had dressed himself when Sami came and knocked on his door. He checked himself over to make sure he was properly dressed. The clothes he had been provided were pretty similar to what he was used to. He now wore a pair of tan, loose-fitting pants than tied at the waist with a drawstring, and a similarly loose-fitting shirt of the same color as the pants. None of the shoes that he had found in the room had fit him, so he just wore his boots. He fingered the collar around his neck, wishing that he could take it off, but there was sadly nothing he could do about that.

Satisfied that he was reasonably presentable, Jack went to the door and opened it. As he'd thought, Sami was standing there. She looked at him, seeming pleased that her selection of clothing had

been appropriate.

“Dinner,” she said. “Follow.” She led him from the guest quarters and back through the gardens to the main house. Once inside, they went through a hall that Jack had not yet been in, and came into a large dining room furnished with a long table. Instantly, the human could smell the scent of cooked food, and his stomach growled as he recalled that he hadn't had anything except military rations and prison food for the past month. A proper cooked meal was something he had sorely missed, and he didn't much care what it was as long as it didn't come out of a package.

Eight Ailians, not including Sami, were seated around the table. All of them turned their heads to look when Jack came into the room, and he was rooted to the floor like a deer in headlights. They were all staring at him as though they hadn't seen a human before, and he'd wager that at least some of them hadn't. Seated at the head of the table was Aria's father. Jack counted five females and two other males seated around the table as well, who must have been Aria's siblings. They all looked younger than Aria, and he recalled her saying once that she was the eldest of nine children. He felt considerably uncomfortable now, being the only human in the room.

Sami showed him to a seat at the table. The chair was much too big for him, but a couple of cushions had been placed on it so that he was seated at the proper height, though his feet dangled a few inches off of the floor. He felt absurdly like the little kid invited to sit at the grown-ups' table. Sami took her own seat, across the table from Jack. The only remaining empty seat was next to Jack, separating him from one of the younger males. He avoided everyone's curious gaze, and instead looked at the decoration in the room. Like the rest of the home, it was decorated simply, with floor plants placed at regular intervals around the perimeter of the room. About the only extravagance Jack could see was a massive portrait mounted high on the wall behind where Aria's father sat. The portrait seemed to have been painted, and depicted an Ailian female in profile, though her head was turned slightly towards the viewer. She had deep green eyes, and her fur was pure white with black stripes.

“Where's Aria?” he asked Sami, feeling strangely like he had to whisper. The room was so quiet.

“Ah...Coming,” Sami replied.

Not a minute after she'd said it, Jack heard the door open behind him. He looked over his shoulder, then turned around fully in his seat. Aria had entered the room, and she was a sight to see. Up until now, he'd only ever seen her dressed in her red flight uniform. Now, though, she was wearing an elegant outfit similar to the clothes her sister wore. Around her waist she had on a black skirt consisting of a shimmery, silky material formed into broad strips which wrapped around her body down to her ankles. She also wore a loose green silk top of the same style, wrapped around her torso from her

shoulders down to just below her breast. The outfit left her arms and much of her creamy furred belly bare. She also looked as though she'd had a bath, and her fur was immaculately brushed to a shiny gloss, her tail fluffed. When she saw Jack looking at her, she offered a small smile, then took the empty seat to his right.

Damn, Jack thought, still staring at her, *but she's...gorgeous*. He felt her hand touch his leg underneath the table, and she squeezed his knee.

Now that the table was fully seated, Aria's father rang a small bell that was on the table beside him. Several Ailians dressed in what looked like formal wear entered the room from a door leading off, carrying trays and dishes laden with steaming food. Jack noticed that none of them had collars about their necks; clearly these were paid servants and not slaves. They set about placing the food on the table, and began serving it to everyone.

With the family's attention now served with a suitable distraction, Aria began telling Jack the names of her siblings. Seated next to Sami were two girls who looked virtually identical, whom Aria identified as twins named Ana and Sana, both twenty, two years junior to Sami. Next to the twins was a male of eighteen named Jin. Finishing off that side of the table was a girl of seventeen, Mari. Aria introduced the male seated to her own right as Lem'a, fifteen years old. Then there was her sister Raya, fourteen, and finally her youngest sister, Li'ara, who was thirteen. Even the youngest of them still had at least a foot of height on Jack, who was no slouch at six feet tall.

When everyone's plate was full, Aria's father said a few words, and his children repeated them in unison, in what sounded like a mealtime prayer. Then the meal began. Jack looked at his plate, which contained food that looked and smelled absolutely delicious. Though composed of unfamiliar ingredients, Jack could identify some kind of meat drenched in a fragrant red sauce, a clump of an orange, mushy substance that looked remarkably like mashed potatoes other than the color, and various other cooked vegetables of green, purple, and white. He picked up his utensils and began to eat, and discovered that everything was just as tasty as it had appeared at first glance.

"Sami do most of the cooking," Aria explained as Jack devoured his meal. She seemed amused at his enthusiasm, watching him eat with a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "We have servants to help, but she enjoy it. You like?"

"Oh yeah," Jack said emphatically. "It's one of the best meals I've ever had. I can't remember the last time I had an actual home-cooked meal, to tell you the truth."

"*Ah, jack le se tre'a'lai han'la re, sami*," Aria said to her sister, who looked very pleased and bowed her head to Jack. He reddened a little, and concentrated on his meal. As they all ate, the servants attended to the table, dishing out second helpings upon request, or third and fourth helpings in Jack's

case.

At one point in the meal, Jack paused to look at the portrait hanging in the room again. He noticed that she bore a very striking resemblance to Aria, and indeed to all of her sisters as well. He mentioned this to Aria.

“That woman in the picture,” he said to her, inclining his head towards it. “Who is she?”

“Ah...” Aria looked at the portrait as well, and Jack saw her expression change. Sorrow crossed her face, and added to it was something that seemed akin to longing. But more than that, it was an expression of loss and pain. “That is mother. Her name Ara'lana.”

“Oh...” Jack remembered Aria telling him about her mother some time ago. “Your mother's dead, isn't she?” He immediately winced. He hadn't meant to say it quite so bluntly, but Aria seemed unaffected.

“Yes,” she said, turning her attention back to her meal. “Mother die three years ago. She was admiral in Ascendancy fleet. Very high honor.”

Jack hadn't known that part. “Your mother was an admiral?”

“Yes. Three years ago, she lead fleet in battle against human military. Very large battle, many ships. Her ship get attacked, destroyed.” Aria gripped her utensils tightly, bending one of them. “Many people killed, many missing. Mother's body never found.” She sighed, looking towards the head of the table, where her father was conversing pleasantly with one of her sisters. “Father hope for many weeks after that she still alive. Say that can't be certain she dead without her body...But eventually we have to accept truth.”

“I'm sorry, Aria,” Jack said.

She waved his apology away. “You not know. I never tell you that much of story.” Aria looked back at the portrait, a wistful smile on her face now.

“...You loved your mother a lot, didn't you?”

Aria nodded. “Very much. She reason I join the military...Always wanted to be like mother...”

Jack and Aria didn't talk for the rest of the meal. He had the feeling that she wanted to be alone with her thoughts, and he was content with that since he had the desire to be alone with his food. When everyone had as much as to eat as they wanted, the servants cleared away the meal. One by one, the family began to leave the table, until only Aria, Sami, and Jack were left behind. Jack felt completely full for the first time in a long time, and now that his stomach had been taken care of he realized how extremely tired he was.

At a yawn from Jack, Sami stopped her conversation with Aria and said something to her in Ailian. “Oh...Jack. You like child, yes? Not know when to go to bed without being told?” Aria asked

him. She jabbed him in the ribs with one finger, teasing him.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jack said, yawning widely again. “I just haven't had a decent night's sleep in a week, is all.” He got up from his chair. “Ah...If you girls don't mind, I'm going to go turn in.”

“Yes,” Aria agreed. She took his hand, holding it for a warm moment. “*Ha'lani*. Have good dreams.” She squeezed his hand, and then Jack pulled away from her. He walked out of the dining room, making his way through the halls, heading for his guest quarters.

When Jack had arrived back at his room, he'd immediately disrobed and crawled into the massive bed. Designed with an Ailian in mind, the bed was easily large enough for two or three humans, and it was soft as feathers. Laying his head on the pillow, he'd been asleep in minutes, his belly full of hot food and his mind dulled by days of little to no rest.

Some hours after he'd first dropped off, he drifted awake again. Squinting through the darkness of his room, Jack lifted his head off the pillow, trying to figure out what might have woken him. He noticed a crack of light at the door, slowly growing larger. Sitting up in bed, he stared at the doorway, still slightly groggy. Then a tall figure slipped inside. The door snapped shut, and as the person moved closer to the bed Jack's eyes started to adjust to the dark, and he was able to make out who it was. It was Aria, dressed in a flowing, satiny nightgown.

“Aria?” Jack murmured, rubbing his eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing wrong,” she said. She walked towards him, her hands clasped behind her back. “I sneak out of my room. Wanted to see you.” Her tail was waving back and forth quickly.

“You did...,” Jack said. His eyes widened in the dark as she slipped the nightgown from her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. She wore nothing underneath. Aria reached the side of the bed, and she slid underneath the covers. In a moment her furred body was curled up next to Jack's, and she took him into her arms, hugging him to herself.

“Missed this,” Aria whispered, nuzzling his cheek. Jack could hear her purring, the low, slow rumble vibrating through him. Her tail curled around his waist. For a long while she just cuddled him, and Jack relaxed with her, resting his head on her pillowy breasts.

“I missed this, too,” he said. The human draped an arm over her, running his hand up and down along her side, stroking her downy soft fur.

Aria made a quiet sound of contentment. “I mean to ask you something...” She paused for a second or two, hesitant. Jack waited for her to continue, curious about what she wanted to ask about. “When we rescued...you...say something. Before they take me.” Aria bit her lip. “You say you...love me. You mean that?”

Leaning back from her slightly, Jack blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected her to ask something like that. Didn't she know that he'd meant it? And it wasn't at all the sort of thing he would have expected someone like Aria to be concerned about in the first place.

Seeming to have read his mind, Aria made a huffing noise, as though reproaching herself for her moment of weakness. "I sorry," she hissed. "Acting like a baby...Forget I-" Her words were cut off as Jack pushed himself up and captured her lips in a deep kiss, his hand cupping her cheek. The Ailian melted into him, wrapping her arms fiercely about him.

"I absolutely meant it," Jack said, parting lips with her. "I think it's the only thing I've ever been sure about in my entire life, Aria."

Aria nuzzled his face again, her purr starting up once more. "*Se le ch'aa ara...*," she sighed, a note of serene pleasure in her voice.

"You've said that a few times now," Jack mumbled, resting his head against her breasts again, "but I don't know what it means."

"Mmmm...Is difficult to translate." Aria thought about it for a moment, tracing a hand up and down Jack's chest thoughtfully. "Like I say, is difficult, but close to...'one who travel through my dreams'." Her hand was drifting lower, flirting just above his groin now. Jack shifted a little against her. He knew what Aria wanted right now, and he was intensely tempted.

Jack lowered one hand, catching her wandering fingers with his own and bringing them back up. He kissed her hand. "This is the craziest thing I've ever said, and I really hate to say it," the human said, half-regretting it even as he knew it was for the best. "But I'm completely wiped out right now, and I really need to sleep. I don't want to be a disappointment to you."

Aria blinked, then smiled at him. "I understand," she assured him, even though he could hear the disappointment in her voice. She very much wanted him right now, but she also knew he'd been through a lot for a human. The Ailian kissed him, and then held him lovingly. "Sleep now." She injected a little command into her next words. "But you make up for it later, yes?"

"Oh yes...", Jack agreed, starting to drift off to sleep again. "Definitely..."