

-Transmission Lost-
-Prayers of the Refugee-
Chapter Five: Where Once Was Light
by Havoc

“Dream as if you'll live forever, live as if you'll die today.”
-James Dean

Jack woke up the next morning before Aria did. When he opened his eyes, he was astounded at how good he felt. For the first time in a long while, he was waking up in a warm home, in a soft, real bed. He wasn't sure how long he had slept, but he could see what looked like early morning light filtering in through the window, and he felt like a million bucks. Yawning a little, he rubbed his eyes and sat up on his elbows, the covers sliding a little down his chest. Right now, it didn't even matter to him what planet he was waking up on; he'd had a full night of sleep, and that was more valuable than anything.

He looked to the side. Aria was still asleep next to him, looking rather peaceful as she breathed regularly, her chest rising and falling slowly. Her long, fluffed tail was still curled around his waist and she had an arm over him. Every so often her fingers would flex slightly in her sleep, as though she was subconsciously assuring herself that he was still there. Jack smiled. The Ailian looked almost adorable, which was saying something since she usually looked quite dangerous and deadly. Still beautiful, though.

As he watched her sleep, Jack began to recall the events of the previous night. Specifically, what had happened when he'd gone to bed, and Aria had joined him. She'd seemed quite disappointed when he'd been too tired to do much of anything other than go to sleep, but she hadn't pressed the issue. But now he was rested, and he remembered that she'd challenged him to make up for lost time. And she had the audacity to be asleep when he was ready to do just that!

Well, I'll show her a thing or two...

Carefully, so that he wouldn't wake her up too soon, Jack extracted himself from underneath her arm. He put one hand underneath her and another on top of her, and he slowly rolled her from her side to her back. Aria made a quiet noise in her sleep, but she didn't wake. He ran a hand down her belly, feeling her taut abdominal muscles underneath his palm and the thin, ragged trail of the long battle scar that ran down her torso. Smiling to himself, he shuffled underneath the bed sheets.

Aria shifted in her sleep, her eyes fluttering as she became aware of her surroundings. She'd been in the middle of a terrible dream, one that she'd been having almost every night since her rescue.

In the dream, she was locked in a glass cage that wasn't even large enough for her to sit down, so she had to remain in a half-crouched position. No matter how hard she pounded on the walls of her cage, she couldn't break out. Through the walls, she could see all of the members of her family, standing in the room outside and looking in at her. She was terrified because she knew she was about to die, and her father, brothers, and sisters were going to have watch it.

What happened next in the dream was always the same, but it was always a horrible surprise. A bell sounded inside the cage, and then hatches opened in the walls of the outer room. Green smoke began to pour in through the hatches. Aria watched in horror as her family began grasping their throats, shuddering and collapsing to the floor outside, their bodies twitching in the final moments of their lives. She was forced to stare at their corpses for an eternity as the gas cleared from room. Then one of the walls of her glass cage swung open, letting her out.

Aria was glad that she had woken up before that point this time. But she wondered what had caused her to wake up. It was at that moment that Aria realized Jack wasn't at her side anymore, and she had a moment of panic, thinking that maybe she was back in her shipboard prison again. She almost leapt up from the bed, but then something made her stop.

"Ka...ah...Ka're te pureh a'lai...", she moaned, her breath catching in her throat.

Jack was underneath the covers at her waist, his hands firmly planted on the insides of her thighs, pushing them apart. His head was nestled between her legs, his lips pressed against her sex. He kissed and suckled at her, his tongue dipping out to slip inside. When he heard her talk, he lifted his head up for a moment.

"I'm not sure what exactly you just said," he whispered up to her, "but I'm pretty sure it means you like it."

"Cha le te na...", Aria hissed back at him. She reached down, placing a furred hand on the back of his head. Her fingers teased through his hair, getting a grip, and she pressed his face back down. "Yes...No talk...Not stop..."

Jack was more than pleased to obey her orders to him, so he went right back to work. Now that she was awake, he wasn't worried about waking her up. He pushed her legs further apart, raising one arm to throw the covers off the pair of them, tossing the sheets in a tangled pile on the floor next to the bed. The tall, strong Ailian laying in front of him was gorgeous, but right now all that he wanted to focus on was her wet, succulent pussy.

He pressed his face in hard, the soft, silky fur that framed her sex tickling his cheeks. As he breathed through his nose, he caught her scent, that subtle musk and hint of spice that he'd come to know well. The smell was captivating, and it filled him with a hunger that needed to be satisfied. Jack

let his tongue slide out from his mouth, and he licked along her nether lips. He probed them apart, then slipped inside, pushing his tongue inside her warmth. Aria moaned softly again, and he felt that low, steady rumble as she began purring.

“Ah, Jack...,” Aria breathed, her fingers tightening on the top of his head. She moved her hips in a slow circle, feeling the sensations rising up within her. As she was quickly learning, this human was very talented with his mouth. He was hitting all the right spots, sending trembles of pleasure through her body. She tensed her back up, arching up from the bed. Aria had been completely ready for him last night, but he had been too weary to satisfy her. She was already very tense.

Jack could tell that Aria was ready to cum. His hands went underneath her rear, cupping her ass and holding her. She was trembling now, her breathing quick and shallow as she undulated against him. He deepened his kiss into her, reveling in her alien taste, letting his tongue play around inside of her. Before much longer, he felt her body give a great shudder, and she mumbled something unintelligible as her pussy seized around his tongue. Jack held her close against his face, letting her ride the waves. Her legs clamped down around his head, and he suddenly found himself unable to breathe.

When she finally calmed and relaxed the vice grip of her thighs, Jack didn't have a chance to pause and catch his breath. As he took a welcome breath of air, she reached down and grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him up. Aria hugged him to her chest, her breasts creating a welcome, comforting pillow for his head. She nuzzled the top of his head, licking at his ears affectionately. Her soft fur caressed every part of his body, and he felt his cock stiffen against her.

“You ready?” she asked him, her voice throaty with desire. One of her hands slid between their bodies, and Jack shuddered as he felt her fingers wrap around his cock. She stroked his length lightly, then gripped him firmly and pushed him down a bit. Her legs hooked around his waist. “Yes... You ready...”

“You're a greedy one, aren't you?” Jack remarked, stifling a groan as she guided him inside of her. She was soaking wet, and he sank in to the hilt immediately. Her warmth spread from his cock to the rest of his body. He relaxed against her, and she put her arms around him, hugging him. The feline felt so good inside, and he was reminded sharply of just how long it had been since they had been together.

Aria seemed to remember that very well, too, because she lowered her head to hiss in his ear. “Not let you relax...,” she said. Her voice carried a firm tone of command. She put a hand underneath his chin, tipping it up so he could look into her hungry eyes. “You going to mate me. Understand?”

“Oh, I understand...”

Pushing himself up on his arms, Jack braced himself against the bed. Aria's golden eyes

widened as he suddenly began thrusting in and out of her, surprising her with his energy. Her tail began lashing against his legs. He felt her claws digging into his back, the stinging pain barely overcome by the extreme delight he took in fucking her as hard and as rough as he could. Jack grit his teeth, leaning back from her. Her claws slid along his back until her arms fell to her sides.

Aria gasped, her arms coming up and crossing behind her head, underneath the pillow. Her human lover had his arms around her waist now, pulling her tight against his hips. He was thrusting quickly and deeply in her, his cock nudging against her womb with each push inside. Unable to keep herself quiet, Aria was crying aloud now, her eyes closed as she gave him encouragement in her own language. She knew he couldn't understand the words, but he understood the meaning behind them.

"Damn, Aria," Jack managed to say. He was struggling not to cum, but he knew it was a losing battle. He was pent up, and he was with a beautiful woman who had spent the night with him, who he'd desperately wanted to make love to last night. He couldn't last much longer.

The Ailian opened her eyes, looking up at him lustfully. "Come," she said. She curled her tail up and around him, her tailtip tickling underneath his chin. "Mate me..."

That was all that Jack needed. He bit his lip, a muffled groan coming from the back of his throat as he started to cum. He leaned low over her, his body shuddering as he pressed deep, his seed flowing into her womb. Aria came up to meet him, catching his lips with her muzzle. They kissed fiercely as Jack filled her up, her pussy milking him for every last drop. For long minutes, it felt like all of their problems were gone, and that they just had each other without any other cares in the world. They could just be a normal couple, if a human with an Ailian could be considered normal.

Aria refused to break the kiss until she felt Jack go limp, and his cock stopped pulsing inside of her. A pool of warmth sat deep in her core, and she purred pleasantly as she sank back onto the bed, bringing him down on top of her. Jack rested his head on her breasts again, looking up into her eyes.

"Did I make up for last night?" he asked her, managing to plaster a sloppy grin on his face.

"Mostly," Aria said, her voice teasingly critical. She brushed the back of one hand against his cheek, then leaned her head down and licked his forehead. "You get more chances, yes?"

Jack smirked at her attitude, though his spirits did raise with that implication for the future. "If you allow me the honor, I suppose," he said. He rolled from on top of her, settling on his back on the bed. When his weight settled on his back, he hissed with a sharp intake of breath as he felt a stinging pain. "Damn, that hurts!" Reaching back to feel himself, his fingers came away with tiny streaks of red on them. Apparently Aria's claws had cut a little deeper than he'd thought. "You must have really wanted it bad this time. I think you scratched me pretty good."

Aria rolled her eyes, making a little noise of contempt. "Being a baby. Roll over." Doing as she

told him, Jack rolled onto his stomach, resting his head on his arms. He felt a sense of relief as the pressure was taken off the scratches Aria had put on him. The Ailian ran her fingers gently along the striations her claws had created. "Is not bad. Besides..." She leaned down to speak into his ear directly. "I like scars."

With that, she stretched languidly out beside him, draping one arm over his back. As he wondered why she'd asked him to roll over, Jack suddenly felt a warm, damp sensation, and realized that she was licking at the scratches on his back. At first it stung, but as her rough tongue continued to lap at his flesh, it began to feel quite soothing. He relaxed, letting out a sigh of satisfaction. Aria noticed how much he seemed to be enjoying it, and she laughed quietly, continuing to groom his back.

"Speaking of scars," Jack said, as something occurred to him, "I've been meaning to ask you. That scar on your belly, how did you get that?" Her licking paused momentarily, and for a second he thought he might have offended her. "Um, if that's too personal a question, you don't have to answer. I was just curious."

Aria set his fears to rest when she laughed quite hard at that statement. "Personal?" You share bed with me, and mate me. Is not much too personal." She flicked her tongue at him a few more times, then rested beside him, apparently finished. "Is not very interesting story, really...but I tell you.

"When I first starting out in military, go through training and get first assignment. Was assigned to ground combat unit, stationed with fleet in deep space, near border with human territory. Deployed on several missions, survive combat, and start to feel invincible."

"Ah, that young recklessness," Jack said. He laid a hand on her side, rubbing her orange fur. She gave a purr, her tail sweeping up to lay across his back.

"Yes," Aria agreed. "Was very foolish back then. But well trained. So...One day, fleet come under attack from humans. Not much for soldier like me to do, until human soldiers board my ship. They infiltrate, go to plant explosives near the engines. My unit assigned to find and stop them. We kill the human soldiers, but not before they plant charges. I have training with explosives, a little, so I go in to disarm them before proper people for that arrive."

"Not the smartest thing to do."

"No. I try my best, manage to disarm most of them. Last one go off while I working on it...Badly injured." Aria shivered a little, feeling a phantom shadow of the pain from that injury. "Large piece of metal from engine room go right through me, stick in my body. They think I dead when they find me, but...not die. And managed to keep hull from breaking apart, saved the ship. When I recover from injury, give me award for bravery, and promotion. But I learn good lesson. Everyone have job, and best to let them do it."

Jack touched a finger to her scar, tracing it all the way down from her collarbone, down between her breasts and to her belly. Her muscles twitched in reflexive response to his light touch. "I doubt everyone who was on that ship would see it that way. You must have saved a lot of lives by doing what you did. I'm sure they're all grateful for it."

"Well...maybe," Aria allowed. Her ears laid flat, and she growled quietly as the fur on her neck bristled. She rolled over, turning her back to him. "And now they charge me with treason. No gratitude for my service." It was the first sign of bitterness that Jack had heard from her.

Moving closer to her, Jack wrapped his arms around her body from behind, holding himself up against her. "Don't think about it," he said, trying to sound soothing. "The trial won't be for a while, right? Just enjoy the time you have until you have to worry about it."

"Yes...Is true..." Aria closed her eyes briefly, then opened them again. His presence against her was comforting, though she cursed herself that she needed comfort at all. She should be stronger than that. "Is getting late in the morning."

It was true, Jack realized. While they'd been otherwise occupied, the light had increased to brighter levels outside. "I suppose we should think about getting out of bed."

"Yes. Only Sami know we...well...together. Not good if rest of family find out, and they come looking for me if they find out I not in my room." Reluctantly, Aria slid out of bed, retrieving her robe from where she'd left it on the floor the previous night and putting it on.

Jack followed her out of bed, his hand rubbing his neck, where his fingers contacted the slave collar that he'd quite forgotten about. "Hey...Before you go, can you take this collar off of me? The slave dealer put it on me, so I'd kind of prefer not to have to wear it anymore."

The look on Aria's face gave him the answer he needed before she even said it. "I...cannot." She looked extremely apologetic. "Slave collars have sensor in them. Is illegal to free human slave. If I take off, someone come to investigate. Would be very bad..."

Though he was not at all pleased with this, Jack knew it would be unfair to bring any further scrutiny on Aria, if it could be avoided. "Alright."

Aria went to the door, but not before bending down and giving him a tender kiss. "Not worry...I find a way to help with it. After the trial...If there is after." She kissed him again. "Breakfast soon. I come find you when ready, yes? Until then, my home your home. Go wherever you like." With a fond brush of her hand along his shoulder, Aria slipped out the door and was gone.

The next two weeks were an interesting experience for Jack, though they were largely uneventful, if one could call a human being housed with a large Ailian family uneventful. Once they

got used to his presence, Aria's family seemed to be cordial to him, if not exactly outgoing in efforts to be friendly. Oddly enough, her brothers seemed much less standoffish than the rest of her family. At least they didn't go out of their way to avoid him, like her sisters did. And Jack was fairly certain that her father outright disliked him, though Aria insisted that he didn't. She told him that he was grateful to him for all that he'd done to help Aria return home, but Jack was quick to point out to her that this wasn't exactly the same thing as liking him. He actually got the feeling that most of her family partly blamed him for the situation that Aria was in right now. In fact, pretty much the only member of her family who didn't seem to consider Jack's presence an inconvenience was Sami, her eldest sister.

Jack liked Sami. She seemed a lot different from Aria, and from the rest of her family. Young Ailians seemed to have a lot of aggression inherent in them, and it wasn't unusual for him to walk in on some of Aria's siblings arguing or engaging in play-fighting. Sami wasn't like that at all. She was a lot quieter and seemed to prefer reading or painting, which was a hobby of hers. Jack learned that some of the paintings that hung on the walls had been made by Sami, including the large portrait of Aria's mother that hung in the main dining room. Aria and Sami were very attached to each other, and he learned from Aria that they had been best friends all through childhood.

Another thing that Jack noticed during his time in the home was that Aria's father didn't seem to be the real head of the household. He was discovering that the Ascendancy seemed to have a very matriarchal culture. Jack had assumed that, even so, Aria's father would have been the real authority figure, but that wasn't the case. In fact, Sami, the eldest female in the household apart from Aria, seemed to be the one in charge. And now that Aria was back, she was taking over more and more of the family's decision-making power. Jack mostly stayed out of things, trying to make himself a little of a bother as he could, since he was a guest in their home.

One of the ways in which Jack tried to make himself useful was what he'd proposed to Aria before: he was doing his best to help Sami learn English. Admittedly, he didn't have any experience at all with being a teacher, but he had assistance with that. As it turned out, the Ascendancy military command had turned out a number of written works with the aim of teaching English. Most of them were even written in phonetically translated English lettering, instead of the jagged, flowing Ailian script. Jack had wondered about that until Aria explained to him, slightly awkwardly, that the books had been printed that way in order to make it easier for human slaves to learn Ailian as well as to teach their masters how to speak English. It was yet another reminder of the situation that Jack found himself in, though he was grateful to have the books. This way both he and Sami could learn at the same time, and Jack was desperate by now to learn how to speak Ailian. He was tired of not being able to understand anyone around him.

Jack didn't limit himself to just teaching Sami, of course. He tried to help out with household chores as well. Though the Me'lia family did have a few paid servants who tended house, the siblings did things around the estate as well, such as tending the garden and cooking meals. Though everything around him was on a larger scale than what he was used to, Jack took every chance he could to assist. In this way, he was able to explore most of the estate without feeling like he was getting in the way. The place was even more expansive than it had looked at first glance. Besides the main house and the guest house, there was a third building on a garden tier above them that was used as a recreation area. Inside was a small court that could be converted to play a number of games, some of which were vaguely similar to games played on Earth. A few other rooms, smaller and more private, were contained in the building. One of them was used by Sami as a studio to paint in, and Aria used another full of padded floors and walls to teach her siblings hand-to-hand fighting that she'd learned in her military service. Jack took her up on her offer for a lesson, but after she almost broke his neck with some of the techniques that Ailian soldiers used he decided it wasn't for him.

A fourth building, set on the highest garden tier, was a small bath house. The inside was designed like a natural hot spring, with an uneven rocky basin that held crystal-clear, steaming hot water. All around the inside was a carefully landscaped inner garden of flowering bushes and small ornamental trees. Aria told him that many well-to-do families on Lirna had bath houses such as these in their homes, though they were only used by the females and were off-limits to the males. So, Jack got to see the inside of it one time, and then he, like Aria's father and brothers, kept out.

All throughout his stay with Aria's family, Jack noticed cracks beginning to form in Aria's tough outer shell. As long as he'd known her, except for the one time when she'd been afraid to climb the cliff with him back on their deserted planet, he hadn't seen her ever show any signs that stress had any effect on her. Now, though, he was seeing indications of the strain that she was under. The upcoming trial was constantly in her thoughts, and dominated much of her day to day life at this point. Every couple of days, a transport from Mat'aar Airbase arrived at the foot of the path leading through the estate, and took Aria back to the base to meet with her commander, Major Tal'in. The major was continuing to handle Aria's legal matters, and would do so until Aria obtained her official advocate. At this point, that was the thing that was giving her the most trouble. By now, Aria's trial was public news throughout the Ascendancy, and the reasons behind her charges were the subject of gossip. She was having trouble finding an advocate who was willing to take her case. The few lawyers who were willing to take the case wanted it mainly for the publicity, and none of them expressed any confidence or belief in their ability to get her cleared of the charges. Both Aria and Major Tal'in understandably turned them down without exception.

Whenever he and Aria were together, Jack occasionally caught her staring off into space, not paying attention to anything around her. She was getting distracted, forgetting small things such as chores around the house, and she was sleeping at times longer and at other times not at all. Her fuse was getting shorter as well, and she was snapping at everyone a lot more than she usually did, growing frustrated more quickly and more easily. Jack found himself trying to avoid her at times, though he could tell he was hurting her by doing that. Another major source of stress for Aria was that she very much wanted to spend time with him, but she was also reluctant for her family to learn of the scope of their relationship. That meant that any time they wanted to be together, whether for sex or just to enjoy each others' company, it had to be done in secret. The strain was incredible, but they tried to bear it as best as they could. They did manage to spend nearly every night together, which was a welcome break. It was only at night, when the estate was quiet and all of the family was asleep, that their problems could be set aside in favor of peace.

Through it all, Aria tried to maintain her composure. But she felt like everything was slowly falling apart, and that it was only a matter of time before something terrible happened.

One evening, Aria stepped into the bath house, weary from a long day. When she had closed the door behind her, she inhaled a deep breath of the steam-laden, clean air. The transport to the airbase had been earlier that morning than usual, and she had spent many hours with Major Tal'in, scouring military law books and legal records for precedents which could be used in her defense. As usual, they hadn't found much of anything. They also had made any progress with finding an advocate, which was what they really needed. A good lawyer would be able to find loopholes and exploits in the legal system much better than they would, as well as have a better idea of how to more efficiently search through centuries of case law.

Shaking her head, Aria tried to banish away the thoughts of her upcoming trial. She needed to be able to shut off now that the day was over, but it was very difficult. Which was why she'd come to the bath house in the first place. She lit several candles, placing them around the rim of the dark bath house. Soft, flickering light filled the room.

<Maybe a long, hot soak will help,> she said to herself. Shuffling off her silken robe, the Ailian stepped over to the edge of the rocky bath. Aria put one foot into the water, continuing in until she was submerged up to her shoulders. <Oh, yes...>

With a sigh of pleasure, Aria closed her eyes, leaning back against the wall of the bath. The water soaked through her fur, and the searing heat seeped into her body and warmed her very core. The stress began to bleed away, little by little, as the bath relaxed her muscles and soothed her worries. Aria

turned around, folding her arms on top of the edge of the bath and resting her head on them. She waved her tail behind her slowly, gently swishing it through the hot water.

<You look like you're enjoying yourself.>

Aria opened her eyes, smiling a little as she heard the familiar voice. <Yes, Sami, very much. Come join me.>

<That's why I'm here.> With barely a ripple, Aria's eldest sister slid into the water beside her. Sami stretched her body out with a purr, showing obvious pleasure at the therapeutic heat of the bath. <I wish I could spend all day in here. But then I wouldn't get any painting done. Though these days I'm having much more fun learning to speak human.>

<Jack is doing a good job, then?> Aria asked, propping her head up on one elbow and looking at Sami.

<He says I am a slow learner, but that I am doing well,> Sami said, laughing. <I would tell him he is a terrible teacher, but I don't know those words yet.> She glanced sidelong at Aria, her eyes sparkling with mischief. <He is cute, sister.>

Aria felt a hot flash inside of her, despite the already high heat of the water surrounding them, and a twinge of jealous anger. <Oh, you think so, do you?> She stared at her sibling.

Sami laughed lightly, waving a hand at her. <Don't worry, I'm not interested in stealing him from you. I doubt I would be able to anyway. He seems quite enamored with you.>

<Oh. Well, good.> Aria calmed down, embarrassed with herself for her rush to anger. She should have expected better of her sister than to think that she had any ideas about Jack. Sami would never do anything like that. <I'm glad, at least, that he's found something to do when I'm away. I imagine he'd be having a pretty terrible time of it otherwise. I don't think many of our brothers and sisters like him very much.>

<You're right about that,> Sami agreed. She closed her eyes and sank lower into the water. <He does talk about you a lot, though. At least, I think he does. I still have trouble understanding what he says to me. But he has managed to tell me a little about your time together after you crashed.>

Aria closed her eyes as well, thinking back to when she was stuck together with Jack back on that alien world. <Sometimes I wish we were still there...I actually think now that it was a lot better than coming back.>

<Oh, don't say that, sister.> Aria felt a ripple through the water. She opened one eye, and saw Sami leaning close to her, curiosity in her expression. <So, tell me...What's it like?>

<What do you mean?> Aria said slowly, her ears pricking up slightly. She opened her other eye, turning her head towards her sister.

<You know what I mean,> Sami chided her, jabbing a finger against her sister's chest. <What's it like, mating with a human?>

<Sami!>

<What? I'm just curious!> Sami leaned back, grinning. <I know you've done it. You've told me so. I just want to know what it's like, that's all.>

Aria turned her head away, crossing her arms over her chest. <I'm not going to answer that.>

<At least tell me this, then. Bigger or smaller than our males?>

Covering her face with one hand, Aria shook her head. She didn't want to entertain this line of conversation, most of all because it was going to make her want to go to Jack, and it wasn't nearly late enough for her to be able to do that without drawing attention. But when she looked back at her sister, Sami looked so eagerly curious that she couldn't help grinning a little. <Well, ah...bigger. Much bigger.>

<Really?> Sami breathed, her eyes glinting in the candlelight. <Wow...>

<And...ah, how do I say this...He is gentler than our males,> Aria said. She toyed with the end of her tail, feeling uncommonly bashful. <He takes the time to make sure I am having a good time, and->

Suddenly, Aria's nose twitched. Through the heavy scent of the steam and the flowers in the air, she had gotten a brief whiff of something else. She stood up in the bath, water streaming down her fur as she sniffed the air, trying to get the scent back. Her ears were standing up straight now, her fur bristling out and her tail hanging stiffly.

<Aria?> Sami asked, growing a little alarmed at this sudden transformation. <Sister, what's wrong?>

<I'm not sure...,> Aria murmured. Her soldier's instincts were awakening again, and she felt like something was very much out of place. She stepped out of the water, not bothering to dry off, and went to the door of the bath house. Carefully, she opened it just a crack, peering out into the darkening evening. She sniffed the air, and listened. Nothing seemed out of place or sounded strange, but...

Then, just as she was about to close the door again, she smelled the scent very strongly.

<Sami!> Aria hissed, looking over her shoulder at her sister. <There's something wrong. I smell humans. Humans that shouldn't be here.> She walked back to where her robe lay on the floor, and she put it back on, cinching the sash tight about her waist. <I'm going to check it out. Whatever you do, stay here and don't make a sound.>

<But...>

<Don't question me, Sami!> Aria growled sharply, baring her teeth. <Just do as I say!>

Sami closed her mouth, trembling with fright. Clearly her sister was serious, and there must be some danger. Aria wanted to say something, to go give her a hug to comfort her, but there wasn't time. She blew out all of the candles in the bath house and then went to the door, slipping out as noiselessly as she could.

Outside, Aria sniffed the air again. The scent was strong; there was more than one unfamiliar human nearby. Keeping to the shadows, she began making her way down from the top garden tier to the rest of the estate, making for the guest house and the main building. If anyone was going to sneak in, that was where they would be most likely to go. Whatever was going on here, Aria was going to find out, and deal with it the best way that she knew how.