

-Transmission Lost-
-Sounds of Madness-
Chapter Five: Remembrance
by Havoc

“There is no greater grief than to remember days of gladness when sorrow is at hand.”
- Friedrich von Schiller

Feeling slightly nervous, Jack stared out the window of the vehicle he was traveling in. Outside, the day was bright, hot, and rather breezy, a typical beautiful day on the desert planet of Lirna. His anxiety stemmed from the fact that, for only the third time since he had been staying at the Me'lia estate, he would be leaving the relative seclusion of the mansion to venture around the city of Hayikwiir, the capital of Lirna and really of the entire Ailian Ascendancy. He wasn't sure what to expect, since he only had experience with the family home, the base through which he had arrived on the planet, and the royal palace. Not helping matters was the knowledge that, after the cancellation of Aria's trial the day before, which had already been the source of considerable gossip in the Ailian media, the Empress was following through with her idea of publicizing their relationship. All part of her plan to try to get the general public of the Ascendancy to see humans as something other than slaves or enemies. Jack knew he'd probably be getting more than the usual amount of stares today. He only wished he could have removed the collar around his neck; it made him feel awkward, but the Empress's willingness to ignore Ailian law didn't seem to extend quite that far, yet.

Turning his gaze back to the interior of the car, Jack looked at Aria, seated next to him. She was looking out the window just as he had been, but she seemed more comfortable and at ease than he felt. Which was probably to be expected, since it was her planet that they were on, and not his. That morning Aria had asked him to come out with her on some errands, and at the time he had eagerly agreed. To tell the truth, he had been growing a little stir crazy, but he was starting to think better of the decision. Although he was very glad to see Aria in such good spirits. Today she had foregone her military uniform for civilian clothes. The Ailian was wearing a loose-fitting top made of bolts of a sandy-colored cloth, with an ankle-length skirt to match. The material was almost, but not quite, translucent, and when the light shone from behind Aria just right one could see the silhouette of her body underneath. Jack got the distinct impression that she had chosen to wear it for him, and he did have to admit that she looked gorgeous in the outfit. As it was, her midriff and shoulders were bared by her clothes, letting him see the fluffy orange-and-cream colored fur that coated her form.

“So where are we headed?” Jack asked, causing Aria to turn her head. “You still haven't told me yet. Going to keep me in suspense all day?”

Smiling at him, Aria shook her head. "Not all day. Just some." She reached a hand over, touching his leg and scratching lightly with her claws over his pants. Jack was, as always, dressed in some hand-me-down clothing from when Aria's brothers had been much younger. "Few places to go. Things to get. Will be nice. You see."

"Still, you're not going to tell me are you?" Jack prompted her again, smirking.

"Not last stop, no. Is surprise." Aria leaned over and touched her nose to his forehead. "You like." Then she paused. "Maybe not like, exactly. But...meaningful."

"If you say so," the human said. He slid closer to Aria, until their hips were touching. "Then maybe you can tell me where we're going *before* the last stop?" He placed his palm over her exposed belly, rubbing around her silky fur in a slow circle. She shifted in her seat, a pleasant expression crossing her face and a quiet purr rumbling in her chest.

Chuckling, Aria placed her hand over hers. "Persuasive." Her tail curled around his feet. "We go to father's main business, first. Need to pick up food for week. Then to market before last stop." Her purring deepened as Jack continued to stroke her belly, and he could tell it was having a most arousing effect on her. "I maybe have driver pull over for hour first, yes?"

Jack was sorely tempted by the idea. "As much as I'd like to...I think I need a break, especially since I also think *you* had enough of that, between last night. And when you woke me up at midnight. And this morning before breakfast." They both shared a laugh, Aria a bit sheepishly. To say that she had been overjoyed to be free and home would have been a grievous understatement. "I am glad you're feeling better, though. It's good to see you happy."

"Is very good," Aria said lovingly. She rubbed her cheek against his. "Is good to not have secret anymore, also."

"Yeah, I guess," Jack agreed. "Having to hide it...It gets to you. Stresses you out. I guess it does feel a lot better to have things out in the open." He sighed. "But it is a little weird knowing the Empress talks about us on your news. It feels like my love life is a matter of public record. I mean, I know it's not like we're fucking on TV or anything, but still..."

"Tee-vee?"

"Never mind. Anyway, yeah. I do like that we don't have to carry on in secret, but I do wish the Empress could keep things a *bit* more private."

Although she still looked curious about "tee-vee", Aria laughed and cuffed him stiffly on the shoulder. "Now you know how I feel, when everyone talk about my trial. Understand these, maybe, yes?" Aria held up her hands, showing him the scars on her wrists.

Jack raised an eyebrow. "I don't think I'll be doing anything like *that* any time soon, but yeah. I

think I get how you reached the breaking point a little better. The pressure of what the Empress expects us to help with is pretty intimidating, even if all we really have to do is just exist.”

When they reached the center of the city, the driver stopped in front of a complex of warehouses. Aria gave the driver instructions to wait, and she and Jack stepped out to walk into the complex. Like most things on Lirna, Jack was impressed and slightly intimidated by the size of it all. Moving around the buildings were tracked vehicles remarkably similar to forklifts, although on a larger scale, carting around wooden and metal crates packed presumably with foodstuffs. Jack recalled that Aria's father, Arn, was a fairly successful merchant who dealt in food, so it stood to reason that he would have a large hub of warehouses like this. Though technically, Jack realized, it all belonged to Aria since she was the head of the family as recognized by Ailian law. According to Aria, this was only the largest; there were several more warehouse complexes on Lirna as well as a few scattered about the Central Worlds.

Jack followed Aria into the complex, trying not to pay attention to the stares of the Ailian workers. Since they worked for Aria's family, they all knew her by sight, so it wasn't all that hard for them to figure out who the lone human slave with her was. Jack's face had been on the news by now, so he was sure that he was at least a little recognizable to them. About the only thing that made him more comfortable was the lack of slave workers around. He knew Arn's feelings about keeping slaves, so Jack was the only one, and considering his actual status he tended to feel like a slave “in name only”. Still, he got the impression that a lot of people continued to feel that Aria was lowering herself by being with him. Having the support of the Empress didn't seem to help much when Jack was surrounded by Ailians who had less progressive views.

Coming into one of the smaller buildings, Aria led Jack to a partition in the back. There they found her father in an office, looking at a computer screen with an assistant. They were talking back and forth, but as soon as Arn saw his daughter come in he stood up and came to the door to greet her.

“*Ha'lani aria,*” Arn said with a smile on his face. He embraced his eldest child, then stepped back to look at Jack. “*Na'ra ke ra'lash alek zetra, jack. Mele kan ra'ale aresh dena?*”

Jack looked at Aria, a bit confused. He'd caught some of what the older Ailian had said to him, but not all of it. Though he caught that the assistant, a younger female, was twitching her tail in embarrassment and looking just a little disgusted.

Aria however, smirked and translated for Jack. “He say you look tired. Say he know some Ailian remedy for stamina.”

A wave of heat washed over Jack's face. He knew that he was probably as red as a beet right

now, but he took it in stride. Arn knew very well what he and Aria had probably spent all night doing, and having him joke about was a lot better than what the typical human father's response might have been. "Tell him I'll pass. If I can survive for a month on a planet hellbent on killing me, I can live through a few midnight rides."

Her eyes widening and the orange fur on her face fuzzing out in a blush, Aria let out a loud laugh. "I keep that private, I think," she said, ruffling his sandy blonde hair. She turned back to her father, her voice sobering up. "*Kure lek te pa?*" Jack understood enough to know that she was asking him how he was holding up. Arn hadn't taken the news that his mate was still alive very well at all, definitely not as well as the rest of the family had.

Arn's shoulders slumped, and he shook his head slightly. "*Na'la*," he growled, his ears lowering. He leaned back against his office desk, staring at the floor for a while. When he looked back up, his expression was closed. Jack got the feeling he didn't want to talk about it right now. "*Zere te'la'ra an me lo'tok, aria. Heren ka delon a'ra vente.*" He gestured to the assistant behind him, and then returned to the computer.

Aria hesitated. Jack had the feeling that her father had just dismissed her rather shortly, and he could tell that the man was hurting pretty bad right now. Whether or not he felt like it, Jack thought Arn probably could have benefited from being at home with the rest of his family rather than at work. Saying so, on the other hand, didn't feel like Jack's place. Aria seemed to feel the same way. She went to where her father was sitting, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"*Kure me a'ran le iza'la mashen...*," she said gently. Her father gave a little sighing huff, looking back at her. "*Le mek te'ren zek aran le've'rete.*"

Arn took a shaky breath, reaching back to lay his hand over his daughter's. "*Me'kre a resho. Iza'la de netela.*" With a weak smile, he turned back to the computer, falling silent again.

Looking at her father sadly, Aria followed the assistant out of the office with Jack in tow. They were taken to a corner of the building they were in, where a stack of specially marked boxes was neatly arranged. A group of workers was waiting nearby.

"This is it?" Jack asked. "Looks like a lot for one week's worth of meals."

"Yes," Aria said. She forced an expression of happiness, despite the mood she was starting to sink into. "Sami think cause for celebration. I home, free of charge...Make some special food this week." She spoke to the workers, pointing to the front of the building, and they started lifting the boxes and carrying them outside to where the vehicle they'd arrive in would be waiting.

Watching, Jack crossed his arms. "Is your dad gonna be okay?" he asked. "I mean...you know...Your mother's responsible for a lot of bad things, now. The invasion of Earth, allying with

those...what are they called...Pteryd. And not to mention the rebellion. That's a lot for him to handle.”

“Father be fine,” Aria said with firm conviction. “Just...need time.” She sighed. “Like us all.”

“I guess so,” Jack said. He looked at the stack of dwindling boxes. “Well, I can do my part to help you all out, anyway.” Clapping his hands together, he walked over to the boxes, finding one of the smaller ones and putting his hands on it. Grunting, he bent his knees and slowly lifted it up. *Oh, geez.* The box had to weigh over a hundred pounds, at least.

Aria wagged her tail in amusement. “You need help?”

“I...I got this,” Jack managed to say. He hefted the box up onto one shoulder, staggering as he tried to take a step forward. “This is...nothing. Just food, after all. Shouldn't be a problem.” He staggered backwards a few more inches, then felt himself steady. Looking back, he saw Aria with a hand against the box, keeping him from falling over. “I don't need any help, but if you wanna walk behind me, you can.”

“I do that.”

Though Jack had assumed that they would be riding in the family transport for the entire outing, he found out that Aria had different plans. When all of the food boxes were loaded into the back of the vehicle, she instructed the driver to return home, and then she and Jack set off together on foot. The heat of the day made this a bit difficult for the human, but luckily the city seemed to have been set up with this sort of thing in mind. Every few blocks there were fountains with disposable cups placed that water could be drawn from. Even originating from this world dominated by deserts, Ailians needed water just as much as any other species. Though her usual impatience was apparent, Aria tolerated Jack's need for frequent stops in the oppressive heat with little overt complaint.

“So, ready to tell me where we're going?” Jack asked Aria on one such stop. They were both having a drink this time, the first time Aria had needed any water but the third drink for Jack. Other Ailians walking by took note of them, curious, but nobody stopped to openly stare like they had at the warehouse. He supposed that the people out on the street were more concerned with where they were going.

Aria crumpled the cup she was drinking from, tossing it into a nearby receptacle. “Yes,” she said. “Going to market. Is old place, one of oldest in city. Outside shops, performers. Is near temple.”

“Temple?” Jack blinked. “You mean like a religious thing?”

“Yes.”

Jack hadn't ever given the concept of Ailian religion much thought. He'd heard Aria and Sami make vague references to “gods”, but he had never asked them about it. “I guess I didn't realize there

was any kind of Ailian religion,” he said. “That wouldn't happen to be the last stop you mentioned, would it?”

“It is.” Aria began walking again. Jack quickly tossed back the rest of his water and hurried to follow. “Have been meaning to go. But could not before trial.”

Catching up with her, Jack matched her pace, walking beside her. They seemed to be approaching an area of increased activity. While many of the Ailians they'd passed on the street so far were dressed formally, Jack was starting to see more of them dressed casually, as Aria was. All of the casually attired people seemed to be walking the same direction that they were.

“Why are we going to the market first, then?” Jack asked. He was looking around at the Ailians walking nearby, scoping them out just as much as they were him. He was finding a new appreciation for the dress habits of Ailians. Many of the females walking around were quite...diverting.

“To pick up a few things,” Aria said. She noticed where Jack was looking, at a russet-furred female several years younger than she was. With a stern expression, she reached a hand out and tweaked his ear. “Not stare.” Then she gave an exasperated-sounding growl. “Males.” She rolled her eyes, her muzzle twitching in a little grin.

Jack grinned back. “Just seeing if you were paying attention.” He placed one arm around her waist, moving closer to her side. Aria looped her tail around him. “Wandering eyes don't mean wandering hands, you know.”

“Hope not,” she said, sounding possessive. Touching a finger to his back, right between his shoulder blades, she lightly traced her claw down his spine. “I own you, yes?” Her finger traced back up, pressing against the collar around his neck.

Suddenly feeling a chill, Jack looked away, a slight hitch in his step. “Yeah, um...Right...”

Aria immediately sensed that she had gone too far. The tall feline stopped, turning to face him and kneeling down to his level. “I not mean that,” she assured him, her voice filled with concern. “I take it off if I could, yes? Hate you being slave. Was joking.”

Jack sighed. “I know,” he said. “I just don't really like being reminded of it, even if I know it's just a formality. It's just that-” He was cut off as Aria put a finger over his lips.

“I understand.” Aria leaned in and nuzzled his face, paying no mind to surprised exclamations from passersby. She was so clearly sincere that Jack found it impossible to be upset any longer by her ill-timed and ill-conceived jest. “I not say anything again.”

“Thanks,” Jack said as Aria stood back up. They both continued walking, in silence, for a few minutes until he spoke up again. “I mean, if you treat me poorly, I'll just run away and find a better mistress...” That earned him a firm slap across the face from Aria's tail, but the tension was broken and

they both laughed together.

A short time later, they arrived at the market. Jack had to stop and stare, wide-eyed, for several minutes as he took in the sight. The market was remarkably similar in appearance to the bazaars that could have been found in the Middle Eastern regions of Earth in centuries past. Numerous stalls were set up, some of them permanent-looking while others appeared temporary. Nearly all of the shops were tented with thick, opaque cloth, creating spots for shoppers and merchants alike that were shielded from the harsh Lirnan sun. Throngs of Ailians, and some human slaves among them, wandered around the market, talking to each other and haggling over goods.

Rising behind the market was the most marvelous building Jack had seen on Lirna, apart from the palace, and he knew it could only be the temple Aria had spoken of. Built of a dark gray, granite-like stone different from many other buildings on the planet, the building seemed to take up three city blocks and towered over the market. The front of the structure was made of tall, thick columns, etched with Ailian script that seemed older than the kind that Jack had seen so far. The rest of the temple had a sort of bonnet roof, with the outside slope very long and shallow while the second inside slope was steeper, with a curved top instead of coming to a point. The edge of the roof was rimmed with stone sculptures. Jack couldn't see any of the sculptures very clearly, due to their height and the sun shining down in his eyes, but they seemed to be bust sculptures of Ailian figures. The temple was larger than any Jack had ever seen on Earth or in pictures.

"Wow...", Jack breathed. He was in awe, and had a feeling running through that he could only call reverence. Looking at a building that magnificent would be enough to make a person believe in at least *something*. "I've never seen anything like this."

"Grand Temple of Hayikwiir," Aria said, sounding a little breathless herself. "Is temple to the gods and goddesses. Many of my people visit every day. Not many still truly believe, but is tradition." She put a hand on Jack's shoulder, squeezing tightly.

"Do you believe?" Jack asked her, curious.

Aria was a moment in answering. "Yes. I do. Have always believed." She smiled faintly. "Sometimes belief hard, but...always return." She nudged Jack's back. "Come. To market."

Jack followed Aria's lead, walking into the market with her. In the crowd, they seemed to be nearly invisible, just two more people walking amongst the stalls. All around them were the yells and calls of merchants, lifting samples of their wares in their hands for examination. Aria stopped at a few stalls, idly browsing the selection. There seemed to be no end to the things that could be purchased. Food seemed to be a common product being sold, though not fresh food like what could be found in the warehouses they'd just come from. Instead, the stalls sold prepared food, dishes that smelled very rich,

heavily spiced, and flavorful, reminding Jack of the street food that could be purchased curbside in New York City, where he'd grown up. Though a few hours still remained until what could properly be called lunch, his stomach growled a little whenever they passed one of the open-air food shops.

As they came closer to the temple entrance, the stalls changed from food and trinkets to more expensive-looking goods. Flowers seemed to be prevalent, and as Aria explained to Jack, many of them were not native to Lirna, instead coming from planets elsewhere in the Ascendancy. Some stalls were selling jewelry, displaying an assortment of necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. They were mostly composed of gold, studded with gemstones, although silver or possibly platinum was represented as well. For all Jack knew, there could be precious metals in the Ascendancy which humans had never even heard of. Passing by one jeweler's shop, his eye was caught by some items that he couldn't identify.

"Aria, what are these?" Jack asked, touching her arm and pointing to the pieces of jewelry.

"Hm?" Aria looked where he was pointing, and her eyes twinkled. "Ah...Pretty!" She reached down to the jewelry display, picking up one of them. The piece was thin, appearing to be made of gold, about five centimeters long and slightly curved. On one end of the curve was a gold ball about one centimeter in diameter that seemed to screw or snap on, and on the other end was a faceted, teardrop-shaped gemstone. The gem was deep purple in color, like a rich amethyst, and was cut down to a sharp point on the long end, with the short base attached to the gold stem. "Is bonding gem."

Jack raised one eyebrow. "A bonding gem? What's that?"

"When two Ailians mate, male gives female bonding gem," Aria explained. She turned the jewelry in her finger, watching the sunlight sparkle on the facets of the stone. "Is symbol of devotion. Pledge to remain loyal."

"I see," Jack said. He looked at the display of bonding gems, seeing a wide variety. Most of them were simple, like the one Aria was holding, but some of them contained multiple stones or flourishes on the metal stems, or even another gem where the metal ball on the simple pieces was placed. All sorts of colors of gems were displayed, but the majority of them were ruby red, emerald green, or clear like diamonds. "So they're for Ailians as engagement rings or weddings bands are for humans."

Aria nodded, having heard an explanation of what marriage was from Jack before. "Yes, but Ailians have no ceremony. Private exchange. Personal. Bonding gem take place of public display."

"How do you wear it, then? Someplace visible, right? Does it go on the ear?"

"No, like this." Aria lowered the hand holding the bonding gem to the part of her creamy-furred belly exposed by her clothes, placing the jewelry over her navel. "Stone sit here..." She nestled the gem

right inside. "...then pierced, and this part here." She pointed to where the small ball at the other end was sitting, about three centimeters above her belly button, where the curve of the jewelry would naturally place it.

Jack whistled. "Wow. That's a serious piercing. I can see where the element of devotion comes in. Must be pretty painful."

"Not know. Never had." Aria smiled. "But pain part of life, yes? No joy without pain."

A very Ailian way to think of it, Jack thought to himself. No way I'd do anything like that to myself, never mind how devoted I was to someone.

Noticing Aria holding the piece of jewelry, the merchant who owned the stall came over. He was an elderly-looking Ailian, completely white-furred and slightly hunched over, but he had keen black eyes. Glancing at Jack, he focused more on Aria. "*Mire te le dok?*" he asked her, his voice rough with age. He looked back at Jack again, a little twinkle to his eye. "*Solan tere aran ke me'lia kan're sutesh le'rea. Zut'e arash le kan hum'an pora de le.*"

Aria shook her head a little, her smile widening a bit. "*Na, nala dok le me. Sute.*" She replaced the bonding gem she was holding on its display, offering a shallow bow to the merchant. The merchant bowed back, much deeper, demonstrating great respect. As he straightened up, he also nodded his head to Jack, much to his surprise. Almost by reflex, he nodded as well.

As the pair turned and moved away from the jeweler's stall, Jack looked back over his shoulder. "I understood he was asking if you wanted to buy that bonding gem," he said, "and I heard you say you were just looking. What was that other stuff he said to you?"

"He say..." Aria paused, looking at the ground as they walked. Jack noticed that her tail was waving from side to side in a very happy fashion. "Say he know us from news. Say he think Empress right, what she say about us. Think bonding gem good idea."

Jack was pleasantly surprised. "Well, it's nice to know at least some Ailians don't have a problem with you and I." He took Aria's hand. His next words came out of his mouth before he'd really thought them through. "And what do you think? Would you accept a bonding gem from me?"

The Ailian looked at Jack with wide eyes. "You are serious?"

"Well..." Jack stammered. He was cursing his big mouth. He probably shouldn't have asked a question that huge without giving it some thought first. If he understood things correctly, he'd basically just dropped the Ailian equivalent of a marriage proposal on Aria. "I mean...Maybe some day, you know. When all this is over. You know, the war and all."

Aria watched Jack as they walked, an expression of wonder on her face. Then she removed her hand from his, slipping it around his shoulders and hugging him to her side. "Yes. Perhaps. When war

is over, like you say..." She bent down and kissed the top of his head.

As they roamed around the nearby shops, Aria finally bought something. At one particularly fine florist's stall she bought a bundle of brilliant flowers, bright orange petals streaked with speckled bands of brown and black. At her request, the shopkeeper she bought them from tied them together with a shimmering green ribbon of some silky material. At another stall, one which was stocked with numerous bottles and bags of fragrant substances, Aria bought a single, small conical cake of something that smelled woody and spicy. She cradled both items in her arms almost lovingly. Jack wanted to ask her what they were for, but he sensed that her mood had changed. He decided that patience was the order for right now.

With her purchases made, Aria led Jack into the temple. They walked past the row of stone columns, passing other Ailians who were leaving the building, and then crossed the threshold of the temple itself. As soon as they were inside, Jack found that the noise of the market was almost instantly silenced. The interior of the temple was very dark compared to outside, and for a minute or so Jack thought that there were no lights inside. Then he realized that the temple was lit, with candles placed at regular intervals behind opaque blinds which diffused the light onto the walls, creating an almost eerie glow that took his eyes a while to get used to. Ailians were walking slowly around the temple, silent except for occasional whispers of hushed conversation. Instead of being separated into different rooms as a church or synagogue might have been on Earth, the temple seemed to be one large area underneath the towering roof. Placed all around the temple were statues, very tall and imposing, made of the same kind of stone that the building was constructed with.

"This is incredible," Jack breathed.

"Oh, yes," Aria agreed. She closed her eyes, breathing in the cool, still air of the temple. "Long time since I come here."

"What gods do they worship here?" the human asked, looking at the statues.

"I show you." Aria took him to the nearest statue, which depicted a male Ailian standing with his legs in a wide stance, a long blade planted tip down into the ground. "Galan'te, god of the hunt. Long time ago, Ailians pray to Galan'te for luck hunting, protection from animals. Soldiers pray to him now, ask for skill in battle, safe return home." They walked to the next statue, across the floor from the first. "Nala'ran, goddess of prosperity." This statue depicted a female, draped in long, luxurious robes, a beatific expression on her face as she held out hands filled with coins. "Merchants pray to her, ask for good fortune in business."

As Jack was shown through the temple, he was introduced to more gods and goddesses than he could possibly have hoped to remember, but Aria recited them from memory without hesitation. There

seemed to be a god or goddess for everything, all the way from good health to good weather. Each of them had their own statue, and each statue had offerings of flowers, food, and various trinkets placed at the bases. Aria explained that most Ailians who came here did so out of tradition, rather than any real belief in the ancient gods. The only visible exceptions were the attendants of the temple, who could be distinguished from the temple visitors by their flowing black and red robes.

Finally, they came halfway down the length of the temple, where one statue was in the center of the floor, standing out from all the rest. The statue was taller than the rest, reaching almost up to the ceiling. Jack tilted his head back as much as he could, looking up at the stone figure. The statue showed a young, beautiful Ailian woman, wearing what looked like a suit of armor that left her head bare. In one hand the woman held a long sword, the point held down towards the ground. In her other hand was a bunch of flowers, clutched to her breast. Her head was tilted with her face to the ground. Jack thought that her features looked very solemn and noble, with a softness that none of the other statues possessed.

“Most important,” Aria said. She walked up to the statue, laying the flowers she had purchased at the base among the offerings left by other temple visitors. The Ailian stood there quietly, her tail hanging behind her, not moving. Her eyes were closed, and Jack thought he could see her lips moving in what he could only assume was silent prayer. When she finished, Aria looked up into the face of the statue. “Is Liren'sa, goddess of love and war. She is most powerful. Leader of them all.”

“Why is that?” Jack asked curiously.

Aria turned to face him. “Love and war very similar. Both have struggle. Both require strength. Drive us all, one way or another.”

Not entirely convinced, Jack just nodded anyway. “If you say so. Still doesn't make much sense to me, but it sounds very nice.” He gestured to the flowers. “Giving an offering to the goddess?”

“Yes.” Aria moved to his side. “Say prayer to Liren'sa. Wish for luck in war.” She looked at the floor of the temple, appearing pensive. “Already have luck in love. Now that I return to war soon...need more luck with that, yes?”

“So now I know what the flowers are for. What about that other thing you bought?”

“Ah, yes. Incense. For this. Follow.” Aria showed Jack to the very back wall of the temple, where the wall was divided into equilateral squares. Many of the squares had words etched into them in Ailian script, none of which Jack could read. Aria started at one end of the wall, her eyes scanning the words carefully. All of a sudden, she stopped, her breath catching in her throat. “Here.” She placed her finger on a square just below her head level, tracing the letters.

Jack looked up at the square. “What does it say?”

Aria bowed her head, her ears flattening to the top of her skull. “Li'ara Me'lia. Her ashes behind

this wall.”

A shiver passed through Jack's body. He remembered well Aria's youngest sibling, the girl of thirteen who had been killed when a band of human commandos, sent by Aria's mother, had invaded the family home. The brutality of the killing had deeply affected Aria at the time. “This is a memorial wall, then.”

“It is.” Aria placed her palm flat on the wall. “Was not allowed to come when her ashes placed here. Here now.” Without another word, she went to one of the candles set into the wall, lifting the cone of incense she had purchased. Lighting the tip, she let it burn for a second, and then she blew the flame out. The incense glowed red, releasing a steady stream of fragrant smoke. Returning to the wall where Li'ara's ashes rested, Aria knelt on the floor, placing the incense there beneath her sister's square.

Not knowing what else to do, Jack knelt as well. He looked up at the square with Li'ara's name, silent for a while. He glanced over at his mate. She had her hands clasped over her heart, her eyes closed, but unlike when she was at the statue of the goddess, she did not seem to be praying. As Jack watched, he saw tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

“What's the incense for?” Jack asked quietly, after several minutes had passed.

“For Li'ara,” Aria replied, her voice hoarse with the grief she hadn't allowed herself to feel until now. “To cleanse her spirit. Bring her peace.”

Closing his own eyes, Jack breathed in the soft and peaceful scent of the smoke. “I hope she finds it,” he said, and he meant it.

Sniffing, Aria leaned over and nuzzled Jack's cheek. Then she gave up all pretense, wrapping her arms around him and drawing him into a strong embrace. As her face touched his, he could feel the tears streaking her fur. He hugged her in return, rubbing his hand over her back. Aria managed not to cry aloud, but he felt her shaking silently, refusing to disturb the sanctity of the temple even with her sorrow over the loss of her sister.

“Thank you for being here,” Aria whispered into his ear, as the last wisps of smoke rose up from the dying embers of incense.

“I wouldn't have missed it.”