

-Transmission Lost-
Chapter One: Ground Zero

“Alright, Jack, here's your assignment. I know you've been complaining about the pay recently, but I can't give you a raise so I did the next best thing. I've given you a military transport detail, so you'll qualify for some hazard pay.”

Jack Squier grimaced a little as he reached out and took the slip of paper from his supervisor. He rubbed his jaw, reaching further up to scratch through his sandy blonde hair as he read out the assignment. When he got halfway through it he looked up, blinking his dark blue eyes at the man seated at the desk in front of him.

“You've got me running combat supplies?” he asked, wanting to make sure he understood. “Seriously? I'm looking at this manifest you just handed me and I'm seeing nothing except rifles, ammunition, and military rations.” Jack turned his eyes back to the sheet, reading the rest. His jaw dropped. “And you've got me on a course that takes me right through a hot zone. In fact, you're sending me straight through Ascendancy territory. What gives? This isn't the kind of job they usually give to civilian pilots.”

Jack's supervisor raised his hands in a helpless sort of shrug. “Hey, Jack, I don't make the routes, okay? This assignment comes direct from naval command. Word on the street is that the UN Navy is running low on transport ships, so they're turning to the civilian fleet to pick up the slack.” The man leaned forward in his chair. “Besides, you did your bit in the Navy, right? I mean, you were a fighter pilot. That's how you got this freighter job in the first place.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Boss, I did my two year minimum like everyone else, yeah? And yeah, I was a pilot, but I got out as soon as I could.” He looked back at the paper, biting his lip. “And I never saw combat action, I only flew escort missions. The closest I ever got to an Ailian ship was seeing a captured cruiser in dry dock out in the Centauri sector. Besides, all that was a decade ago, before the war really started getting serious.”

“Alright, then,” the boss said. He reached for the slip of paper. “If you don't want the job, then...”

Jack jerked the paper back. “Hey, whoa, I didn't say that. This is a six-figure cargo run, and I need the money.” He scanned the sheet again, taking a deep breath. “Alright, I'll take it...When do I leave?”

“Tomorrow. Here's your key card.” The boss handed him a small strip of metal about the size and shape of a credit card. “We're giving you the *Star's Eye*. She's got decent armor, weapons, and

shields. Not the most maneuverable ship, but she should get you there in one piece, and she's fast as long as you're not trying to take any tight turns out there.”

“Well, let's hope I don't run into any trouble, then,” Jack said, frowning. “Can't give me something smaller? The *Moonshadow* or *Andromeda Maiden*?”

“Not large enough to handle the cargo you're carrying. The *Star's Eye* is the largest cargo ship we have that still carries a one-man crew. Relax, Jack, you're only gonna be in Ailian space for two realspace stops. The rest of it's hyperspace until you get to the Antaeus sector. By then you'll be well within friendly territory. Don't worry about it. Besides, you hate working with other people, remember? Consider this a blessing.”

Jack walked out of his boss' office into a typical New York City afternoon, looking back over his shoulder at the sign. “Stellar Horizons”, it read, and underneath was emblazoned the company slogan “You have it, we'll ship it! Lightspeed guaranteed!” He shook his head.

What a cheesy slogan...

Jack walked down the street, heading for his apartment. A lot had changed in New York in the last ten years. For one thing, there were a lot more recruiting posters than there used to be. Everything had ramped up since the war with the Ailians had begun in earnest.

Like most humans, Jack could remember how it all began. He'd been sixteen years old when colony planets started reporting probing attacks from an unknown source. At first, everyone had just assumed it was the usual: smugglers or pirates trying to score. That theory had been blown out of the water when an entire colony on one of the Outer Milky Way worlds had been completely destroyed...with nothing being taken. Ships responding to the distress call had reported finding no survivors, locating nothing salvageable, and most unusual of all had spotted ships of an unknown type at the edge of the system, rapidly leaving the area.

These hit and fade attacks had continued for nearly a year, and then finally a naval unit had managed to respond to an attack before the enemy ships could flee. What they had discovered had changed the course of human history.

First contact had been made with the Ascendancy, an empire spanning several galaxies inhabited by the feline race of the Ailians. Looking as a cross between a ten-foot-tall human and a Bengal tiger, the Ailians were strong, ruthless, and extremely protective of their territory. And as it just so happened, humanity had unknowingly begun to encroach upon that territory. Thus humanity had entered into war with the Ascendancy, just as determined to expand their borders and claim much-needed resources as the Ailians were to retain them and take over human territory for their own.

For much of the beginning of the war, humanity seemed to have the advantage. The Ailians were fond of their style of hit and fade, preferring to strike hard and fast and then disappear quickly, often before they could establish any kind of a foothold. UN Naval Command foolishly assumed that it meant they far outnumbered the Ascendancy in terms of naval strength, and pressed their campaign deep into Ascendancy space. Then the enemy had revealed the true strength of their forces, launching a blistering counterattack, dividing and pushing back the UN fleets. Before command had fully adjusted to the new situation, the fleets were separated, holding islands of colony worlds within the main body of Ascendancy space. This had led to the current situation where private cargo carriers were being hired to ferry supplies to the stranded fleets, keeping them restocked and repaired so that they wouldn't be overrun.

Jack shook his head again. *Listen to me, giving myself a history lesson...*

He made his way back to his apartment. Small as his salary was, and even with his pittance of a military pension, all that Jack could afford was a cramped little one-bedroom affair on the second floor of a fifty-story building. At least, it would have been cramped if he'd still been sharing it with someone. But she'd left a few years ago, and he had the place to himself.

His stack of takeout menus was in its usual spot on the kitchen counter, and he picked them up, wondering what it would be tonight. Jack looked at the refrigerator and contemplated cracking open a beer, but he decided against it. Knowing him, one beer would become three, or four, or five, and come morning he'd be too hung over to be able to fly. And he'd already called out sick enough times this year that once more would see him in an unemployment line next week.

Jack sighed. He'd fallen a long way since he'd been a brash young fighter pilot, a job that he'd enjoyed more than he was willing to admit to himself. He'd had dreams then, dreams and ambition. But seeing the horrors of those first few years of war, even from his fairly high safety as an escort pilot, had convinced him that he wasn't cut out for the military.

Oh well. Chinese food seemed as good a meal as any.

“*Star's Eye*, you've got clear weather, and winds less than five kilometers per hour. You're clear to take off whenever you're ready.”

Jack strapped himself in, flexing his fingers around the dual joystick-type handgrips which served to control his ship. He winced as the voice crackled over his communication system, squeezing his eyes tight briefly to block out the piercing pain. Jack had been good, hadn't touched a drop of alcohol all night even though he'd had trouble falling asleep, and *still* he'd woken up with a splitting headache that four aspirin hadn't managed to completely banish.

“Star’s Eye, Control, I copy,” Jack said. *“Making my takeoff now. Make sure you’ve got my pay ready when I get home. Cash only, I don’t take credit.”*

The polite laugh crackled back with a burst of static. *“Whatever you say, Jack. Just make sure the cargo gets where it’s supposed to go.”*

Jack shut off his comm system and turned his attention back to his control board. He flipped several switches and was rewarded with a strong thrum from the four engines as they powered on. With a press down of his left foot, the ship leapt off the spaceport tarmac to an altitude of a hundred meters in an instant. Jack grinned, despite the headache. He always enjoyed flying. Calming down a little, he angled the rounded nose upward, pointing the the smoothly ovoid ship towards the sky. Pressing the accelerator pedal smoothly down, he jetted upwards, gaining speed and altitude steadily. A thousand meters, ten thousand, one hundred kilometers...Before long the pale blue skies faded into dull purple, then deep purple, and finally black as he passed through the outer reaches of the atmosphere.

The thrill of spaceflight pounded in Jack’s chest, and he turned his head to check that he had a clear path. The nearest ship to him was a massive war cruiser that seemed huge even though he knew it had to be twenty kilometers from him at least. Clear skies, so to speak, all around.

Taking his right hand off his lateral control stick, Jack punched up the heads-up display for his navigation computer, which displayed in front of him on the forward viewport. Sighing, he punched in the coordinates for his first stop, just within the inner edge of Ascendancy space. The computer chirped acceptance of his coordinates, recognizing that they weren’t within the mass of a star, planet, or anything else that could reduce his ship to so much space scrap. With a final tap of several console buttons, he settled back in his pilot chair. The automatic pilot would take it from here.

With a dull roar, his engines went to full power, and he was pressed back into his chair as his ship accelerated to lightspeed briefly before flashing into hyperspace.

It had been nearly two days since he’d left Earth, and Jack was starting to feel pretty silly for having been worried about his route earlier. His first stop in Ailian space had been completely uneventful, and he hadn’t been within a million kilometers of an inhabited planet, let alone any other ships. An hour’s rest for the ship’s computer to recalibrate with his new position, and reposition itself for the next jump, and then he’d been sent back into hyperspace for his next leg.

Jack yawned and got up from his chair in the cockpit, exiting and walking back into the ship to the small cabin in the midsection. There was a small bed in there, and it was comfortable enough to be good for quite a long nap. Jack had been up for two days, and he could use a few hours shut-eye. Besides, his autopilot was quite good enough to handle a simple hyperspace jump, and the shipboard

computer would alert him, either if something went wrong or when he reached his checkpoint further in Ailian space. He laid down and closed his eyes, grateful for a chance to relax.

Five hours later, Jack was awoken by the soft chime of the ship's computer. He blinked, alarmed for a few moments without realizing why, but he told himself to calm down when he recognized the sound as the normal alert that he was coming out of hyperspace. He got out of bed, stretching his arms, and went back to the cockpit, flopping down in his chair and surveying the space before him. All clear, except for the small disc of a planet off to one side. Uninhabited, he knew, at least according to the star charts in his computer. All clear, though he was deep in enemy territory. All clear.

So why, he wondered, did he feel like there was something wrong?

A moment later, his question was abruptly answered as a ship flashed by his viewport, accompanied by a loud crash and a shudder of his ship as a cannon blast struck his passive shields.

“Shit!” Jack yelled, completely surprised. He watched the unknown ship as it heeled over, facing back towards him. The enemy (he was already thinking of it that way) was painted completely black with fringes of yellow and red along its edges, which were jagged and angular. The ship wasn't all that smaller than his own, and from his time in the military Jack could tell that it was a patrol vessel of some kind, probably one- or two-manned. Out of reflex, he boosted power to his shields and switched on what few weapons he had.

Suddenly his comm speakers screeched with feedback. Jack cursed again, reaching for the cutoff switches, but no matter how many times he pounded on them the noise persisted. Belatedly he realized that whoever was in that ship was tapping into his own ship's computer and overriding his comm systems, probably to keep him from trying to call for help. Jack glanced at his status monitor, seeing that he still had a few seconds before his weapons would be powered up. The screechy static on his speakers ceased just as suddenly as it had begun.

“*Sala'a'kre,*” a sharp, mewling voice echoed through his cockpit. “*La aria me'lia kan ailia're. Suri te sala'a'kre.*”

Jack's blood went cold when he heard those words. He had absolutely no idea what the words meant, but there was no mistaking the language. Whoever was in that ship was most definitely Ailian, and the fully powered weapons that his sensors were detecting meant that they were most definitely not friendly.

Against all odds, despite supposedly traveling through an uninhabited sector of the Ascendancy, he had run across an Ailian scout ship.

His computer chimed, and Jack glanced down to see that his weapons were now fully charged. He grabbed his control sticks, his finger on the trigger that controlled his cannons. The *Star's Eye* was

armed with two forward-firing particle cannons and one double-barreled laser cannon mounted on a swiveling turret on the underbelly. For far-ranged targets, he had two micro-missile tubes. Jack wasn't sure what kind of armaments the other ship had, but he was sure it had more than his and he was *damn* sure it had better shields. But he also knew that because he wasn't dead yet, the pilot was meaning to take him prisoner, and *that* meant reinforcements probably weren't far behind. So Jack needed to get away and get away fast.

The voice came over his comms again. “*Sala'a'kre, relax a...*”

Jack keyed up to broadcast on the same channel. “Yeah, yeah, 'sala'a'kre', motherfucker.”

Jack pressed his accelerator to the deck, darting forward towards the Ailian ship. At the same time he squeezed his trigger, sending out several bursts of particle cannon fire. The pilot of the other ship was very good. One beam barely splashed against its shields before the patrol ship darted out of the way. The return fire blasted against Jack's shields as he flew through the space the enemy had previously occupied.

Just like being back in the service, Jack thought to himself. His grip was death-tight on the control sticks, however, as he reminded himself that he'd never been in combat except in simulators. The enemy ship was a lot more maneuverable than his, and before he even had a chance to think about it the other pilot had gotten on his tail and started hammering his aft section with cannon blasts. Cursing to himself, Jack jerked his ship down and to the left, spiraling away from the punishing assault. His shields wouldn't be able to take much of what the Ailian could give him.

The patrol ship stayed right with him, but Jack's maneuvers made sure that it wouldn't have a straight shot at him for longer than a few seconds. All the while Jack was firing behind him from his laser cannon, knowing that he probably wouldn't score any hits. Any distraction he could offer the pursuing pilot was good, though.

After almost almost three minutes of this cat-and-mouse game, Jack chanced a glance at his navigation computer, which had been automatically working on the next leg of his route. He didn't like what he had seen, although he could hardly have expected anything else. Normally, calculations for a hyperspace jump could take just under an hour, but that was with the jumping ship staying completely motionless. With all the twists and turns that Jack was taking the *Star's Eye* through, the computer's current estimate was sitting at just over four hours.

A screech of metal and the dull thud of an explosion told Jack that he didn't have four minutes, let alone four hours. Red lights were flashing on his status console as he lost his particle cannons, targeting for one of his missile ports, and half of his maneuvering thrusters. His shields were showing yellow, in the danger area, as were his main engines, life support, and shipwide electrical power.

I don't have a lot of options, Jack thought to himself, sweat dripping down his face. *I can surrender, I can die fighting, or...*

“Shit,” he said, making his decision. Feeling his engines straining, Jack leveled out, taking the ship on a straight course. The assault from the Ailian vessel stopped for a moment, as the pilot was perhaps surprised by this sudden development. Jack had been counting on that hesitation to happen, because no pilot in the known universe would think anybody would do anything as stupid as what he was about to do.

Jack looked over as the Ailian ship pulled alongside his. While he was certain the pilot of the other vessel could see into his cockpit, Jack couldn't see through the blacked-out viewports of the other. Nevertheless, he knew the enemy pilot was looking right at him, so he smiled and gave a jaunty wave. Fighting the nausea that was threatening to make him spew his guts all over his controls, Jack reached for the override switch that controlled the safeguards on his hyperspace engines.

“Here we go,” he whispered to himself, and he pressed the switch, turning off the safeguards. Taking a deep breath, Jack did possibly the most desperate thing he'd ever done in his life and activated his hyperdrive, sending himself away from the Ailian ship on a blind path through hyperspace.

As much as Jack had been sweating before the jump, now he was sweating even more. Every second that he remained in hyperspace was putting thousands of kilometers between him and the enemy ship, but it also meant an increasing probability that he would collide with a comet, a planet, a star, or any other of the hundreds of objects in space that could kill him.

Jack held the jump for ten long, brutal, agonizing seconds, and then he could bear it no longer. He deactivated his hyperdrive, bringing his ship back into realspace. As soon as he did, the *Star's Eye* was rocked by two large explosions and the cockpit lights flickered before becoming steady again. Groaning, Jack pulled up shipboard status on his computer. All of his engines, shields, and most of weapons were useless now, and he was steadily losing life support. Reacting quickly, Jack got out of the pilot's chair and ran to an emergency locker just aft of the cockpit. He pulled on a vacuum suit and grabbed three spare air canisters for the attached breathing mask, ensuring that if life support did go completely he'd at least be able to breathe long enough to try to get it started back up again.

Returning to the cockpit, Jack sat down and checked to see what systems he still had available. As far as weaponry was concerned, all he had was one functional launch tube of micro-missiles. He also had his maneuvering jets and hyperspace engines. As well, his computer systems were completely unharmed. Jack knew that with a little finagling he could convert one of the hyperspace engines to operate like a regular one, but he couldn't do anything about the weapons, the disabled engines, and the shields without a place to set the *Star's Eye* down.

“Well,” Jack sighed, “I guess I’m not going to make my destination in time.”

Leaning back in his chair, Jack finally looked out the cockpit windows. He was surprised to find himself in very close proximity to a planet, close enough that only a few minutes of travel would get him to it. If he'd had engines to travel with, that is. Jack pulled up his charts, wondering where exactly his current position was. After several minutes of work the computer pulled up his location on the screen, and Jack was bewildered. According to his charts he wasn't in Ailian or human territory, and the planet in front of him was not labeled.

“Jesus, I didn't think any uncharted planets were left out there.”

Jack took another look at the planet. It wasn't a large planet by any standards, maybe two thirds as big as Earth. Of the surface that Jack could see, roughly half of it was covered by blue oceans. The rest was one large continent of brown and green, with several small patches of what looked like desert here and there.

Not a bad planet to be stranded near, Jack thought. He sighed, cracking his knuckles, the adrenaline from his little dogfight starting to bleed off. *Well, guess I'd better get to w-*

With a flash and a shockwave that jostled his ship, the Ailian vessel flashed out of hyperspace next to Jack, smoke trailing from numerous areas on its hull. He had no idea how it had happened, but somehow the enemy ship had followed him through his blind jump. Even so, the Ailian had evidently not fared as well as he had, and seemed to have had a glancing collision with something while in hyperspace. As Jack watched, the ship began to drift, the largest trails of smoke coming from the area of its engines.

But as crippled as the patrol vessel might have been, it was anything but completely disabled. Jack felt a hammer blow to the side of *Star's Eye* as a beam of laser fire lanced out at him. A hissing noise and a sudden rush of wind blowing aft told Jack that his hull had been breached, and his hand automatically grabbed the breath mask and slapped it to his face. More of his status lights went from yellow to red.

“Not this time, you bastard...,” he muttered behind the mask. He was really angry now. His headache was back, he'd only had five hours of sleep in the last two days, and to top it off he was most definitely not going to make his destination on time, which meant he could kiss his paycheck goodbye. Jack pulled up his weapons display and selected his last functioning missile tube. “Here you go.”

Jack pulled the trigger, and a salvo of the micro-missiles lit off and made straight for the Ailian patrol ship. He watched the missiles' path, watched as they streaked towards the enemy. There was a sputtering of fire from the Ailian's maneuvering jets as it tried to evade, but without functioning engines there wasn't any way it could avoid them. The line of missiles rippled along the side of the

patrol ship, blossoming explosions along its hull. Jack watched, triumphant, as the ship began losing altitude relative to the planet and got caught in the gravity well.

His triumph was short-lived, however. The Ailian ship fired a second salvo of laser beams at Jack, and he was thrown forward against the controls. Alarms began sounding through his ship as he felt an almost imperceptible tug, and he knew that he too had been caught in the planet's gravity.

"Damn, damn...", Jack hissed. His hands danced around the controls, trying to find something that he could do to arrest his fall. But he didn't have anything left. The crash was inevitable, and all Jack could do was try to ensure that he would survive it.

As Jack watched the planet rush up, he saw fire starting to lick across his viewports as he hit the atmosphere. The same was happening to the Ailian ship, slightly ahead of him. The distance between the two ships increased as the shape of the patrol vessel tugged on the air, changing its trajectory. Jack's ship, more aerodynamic for atmosphere, kept on a more or less straight course. Jack unstrapped himself from his seat, having watched enough. He flipped a few switches on the console in front of him, hoping that the automatic crash landing functions of the *Star's Eye* would still work well enough. His last view of the planet was of clouds rushing past his windows.

Running back towards the rear of the ship as steadily as he could manage with the jostling of the doomed ship, Jack found the crash room. The crash room was a small compartment, big enough for a person to just fit inside, housing a jump seat suspended by large sturdy springs on the top, bottom, and sides. Jack sat in the seat, strapping himself in tightly. He pulled the door shut and sealed it, listening as the wind of the atmosphere rushed past his hull and whistled through the breaches in the skin of the ship.

Not much longer..., Jack thought to himself. *Not much longer at all...*

He closed his eyes, rested his head against the back of the jump seat, and waited for the crash.

The smell of smoke burned Jack's nose, finally rousing him from his stupor. He jerked upright, blinking, then wincing against the throbbing headache and soreness that washed over him. Flexing his arms, he felt himself over, checking for injuries. Besides torn clothing, sore ribs, and a wicked cut across his chest from where one of the jump seat straps had dug into his skin, he seemed to be unhurt. A little late, Jack checked the gauge on his breath mask.

Ran out...fifteen hours ago? Damn...Well, at least that means the atmosphere here isn't poisonous...probably. Jack unfastened the straps holding him in his seat and stood up, feeling the stiffness in his legs that was to be expected from sitting in one place for half a day. *First things first...*

Jack exited the crash room, thankful that there was still enough power left in the ship to operate

the doors. A thin haze of smoke hung in the passageway outside. Jack wasn't sure what the source of the smoke might be, but he felt no heat at all as he walked through the ship, so he was pretty sure that whatever had burned wasn't burning anymore. He made his way to his cabin in the aft section of the ship, picking his way around fallen sections of ceiling and buckled plating. Once he got there, he grabbed a first aid kit and set to work on his minor injuries. A disinfectant wipe and a generous strip of artificial flesh took care of the cut across his chest, and three aspirin tablets got to work on the headache and the soreness.

Jack pulled off the ripped vacuum suit and flight uniform he'd been wearing. He tossed them in a corner of the cabin and opened a drawer in a side wall for some fresh clothes, of which he hadn't brought many since he'd expected the voyage to only last four days. What he did have was some dusky-blue-patterned camouflage fatigues that he'd kept from his time in the military, which still fit snugly but comfortably on his body. He pulled on a pair of high-topped black boots and grabbed a ballcap to cover his head with.

"Right, then....," Jack muttered to himself, sitting down on the bed. He was quiet for a moment, trying to decide what to do next. He'd made it through the crash in one piece, which meant the automatic crash landing function of the ship must have at least partially worked. The likelihood that the ship was still flyable, however, was slim. Definitely the *Star's Eye* was not spaceworthy. And unless a miracle of truly biblical proportions had occurred in the time between when Jack had passed out and when he'd woken up, his long-range communications would still be disabled from the earlier fight. Jack knew he wasn't a skilled enough programmer to be able to undo the work of a military override, at least not without a lot of trial and error.

"Okay," he said, standing up. "Guess I'll go outside and have a look around. It's getting stuffy in here, anywhere." Jack went for the door that led out of the ship, which was just outside of the door to his cabin. His hand paused over the control mechanism. "Better safe than sorry..."

Jack returned to his cabin, opening a locked compartment underneath the bed. Reaching inside, he drew out a belt made of military-spec webbed material. Attached to it was a holster, magazine pouches, a flashlight, and a small fixed-blade knife. Jack checked the holster out of habit. Fitted snugly inside was a matte-black .45 semiautomatic. The same one, in fact, that he'd carried as a pilot in the Navy. Jack enjoyed shooting and he'd kept up with it after retiring from the military. With ten shots in the magazine, one in the chamber, and four spare magazines on his belt, Jack would feel quite a bit safer stepping out onto an unfamiliar planet than he would have without it. He strapped the belt around his waist, and went back to the door.

"Alright, world...Let's see what you got." He pressed the door release, and with a strained groan

the hatch opened. Jack stood there, looking out, feeling a certain sense of awe. “Yeah, that’s...That’s something, alright.”

Light from the sun of whatever solar system he was in warmed his face. The light was filtering down through thick trees all around the crashed ship, tall broad-leafed trees of purple, dark green, and iridescent blue. The alien forest around him was thick enough that he couldn’t see very far, but not thick enough to make it dark. Jack looked down at the forest floor, and found the source of the smoke inside the ship. When the *Star’s Eye* had come down, heat from the hull had set fallen leaves afire, and the smoke had seeped into the ship through the breached armor plating. Where the forest floor had not burned, Jack saw short green grass covered in a layer of dead brown leaves. He wasn’t sure how the crash hadn’t set off a huge forest fire, but from the smell of the air it seemed that he was in a rainforest type of environment. Perhaps the heavy moisture of the area had prevented the fire from spreading.

Sitting down on the edge of the hatch, Jack hopped the short distance down to the ground. He landed lightly, his boots squelching slightly against the soil, which was damp. It seemed as though rain had fallen recently, perhaps even since the ship had crashed. Jack stood there for a minute or two, listening and looking around.

The air smelled not too different from the air on Earth, but it was fresher and just a little bit thinner. Whether the thinness was from altitude or a lower oxygen content, Jack couldn’t tell yet. A number of trees lay fallen around him, knocked over by the crash. He looked straight up, and saw a pale blue sky smeared here and there with white clouds. All around him was a constant noise that sounded like birds calling.

Jack looked back at the ship, and started walking around it. The damage from outside looked a whole lot worse than he’d imagined from inside. His engines were almost completely wrecked, and the hull was crumpled in numerous places, with gashes in the armor plating showing through into the inside of the ship in some places. Dusk was starting to set in once Jack completed his evaluation of the *Star’s Eye*, and he shook his head as he came to his conclusion.

“There’s no way this ship is flying again,” he said. “Not without at least a month to make repairs. And I don’t know if I can cannibalize enough non-essential parts from the rest of the ship to make the repairs I need to get back into space with.”

That said, though, Jack had to admit that it wasn’t as bad as he’d expected. His main problem, of course, was patching the hull to make it airtight and getting the main engines back online. His hyperdrive engines had been protected inside the main engine block, and so he didn’t need to worry about the hyperdrive at all. Parts to make the repairs he did need to worry about, however, was the big problem.

Jack's head jerked around as he heard a low, loud roar somewhere off in the distance.

“Damn...Guess I should have expected there might be some big wildlife here.” He looked back at the ship again. “At least I have plenty of supplies. The cargo compartments are packed with guns, ammo, and preserved food.”

With darkness falling, Jack knew he needed to take shelter. He didn't feel much like going back into the wrecked ship, though, so he opened an exterior hatch into the cargo hold. Most of the cargo he'd been carrying was still intact, surprisingly enough. He rummaged around until he got to the general military supplies, and dug around in them until he found what he was looking for: encamping materials. Grabbing one of the crates, he pulled it out of the ship and into the clearing the crash had created. Jack knew he had precious little daylight left, so he had to work fast.

A rustle in the trees nearby, however, made him pause and straighten up, looking around. Whatever had made the noise had seemed very close, and larger than a bird. Jack peered into the trees, waiting for the noise to repeat itself, but he heard nothing else. Neither did he see any movement. He shrugged and turned back to the supply crate, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was watching him. He told himself that the very next thing he would do after setting up camp was to grab a rifle out of the cargo hold.

Hours later, darkness had completely fallen over the alien forest, and stars twinkled in the sky overhead as Jack sat in his encampment. He'd been able to dig a fire pit, and there was plenty of wood scattered about for him to build a fire with and keep it going for a while. He'd also managed to set up a fairly large tent that had plenty of room inside for a bedroll and a store of preserved food. True to his promise to himself, Jack had gone back into the cargo hold and retrieved an automatic rifle, along with a hefty supply of ammunition.

Jack sat next to the fire, shivering a little despite the warmth from the flames. This planet was a little chilly at night. At least he'd been able to eat a meal, though it had only been canned meat and dried fruits, cooked over the fire. That was better than nothing, but not much better. He still couldn't shake the feeling of unease, the paranoid sense that someone or something was watching him from the trees. In the hours since he'd heard that strange noise, though, he hadn't been able to spot anything in his surroundings. But still...

“Fuck it,” he said suddenly. He stood up, grabbing the rifle from where it lay beside him. He yanked the charging handle, slamming a round into the chamber and taking the safety off. Taking the flashlight from his belt, he clipped it onto a holder on the side of the rifle and switched it on. “If I don't have a look around, I won't be able to sleep, anyway.”

Jack walked to the edge of his encampment, directing the rifle and the light into the trees around the clearing. He searched more or less methodically, creeping around the perimeter of the crash site, peering into the forest for any signs of movement. After getting back around to where his tent was set up, he hadn't found anything. Jack felt better, even though he did feel a little foolish for being so paranoid. He walked back to the fire, setting his rifle down.

His head jerked around as he heard the snap of a breaking twig. Suddenly frantic, his hands went down to grab for the weapon again, but he stopped at a sound that hissed through the night air.

"Sala!"

Jack froze, his hands mere inches away from the rifle on the ground, bent over as he looked through the darkness towards the source of the familiar voice. Leaves rustled as it moved closer, and finally the speaker emerged from the trees into the light cast by the campfire.

Three meters tall. Pale orange, black-striped fur. A long tail, nearly half as long as the body was tall. Bipedal, two arms, carrying a rifle only vaguely similar to Jack's own. Clad in a singed red flight suit, bright yellow eyes reflecting the firelight. Female.

Jack straightened up, trying to fight the urge to panic. He turned towards the figure walking his way, staring right down the barrel of her weapon. He raised his hands, staring.

The Ailian bared her predator's teeth, and tightened her grip on her rifle, staring right back at him, pure unadulterated hatred in her eyes.