

-Transmission Lost-
Chapter Two: It Takes Two
by Havoc

Jack Squier stood there, shaking slightly, facing down the Ailian female who had her rifle aimed straight at his face. She was even larger in person than he had imagined an Ailian would be. He estimated that she was at least three meters tall, putting her height at about three feet above his. The rifle she was holding was pretty big, too, and he didn't really want to imagine the size of the holes it could make through his body. He looked down on the ground where his own rifle lay. For a split second he considered making a go for it, but he wisely thought better of that idea.

Her long tail twitched, and a breeze ruffled the orange and black-striped fur that was exposed outside of her red flight uniform. “*Seresh te a'krai*,” she growled, jerking her weapon at him. “*Suri te seresh te a'krai*.”

Jack raised his hands higher, confused. He had no idea what she was saying to him, but her eyes were flashing in the firelight, and he had a pretty intense desire to do whatever it was she wanted him to do. He opened his mouth, which was almost completely dry.

“I don't...I don't, ah...”

“*Ka'sa!*” the Ailian snarled, gesturing with her weapon again. “*Suri te seresh te a'krai! Suri!*” She took a step towards him, her fingers flexing on the rifle grip. Her form towered above his.

Jack felt himself growing angry, despite his fear. “Listen, I don't understand a fucking word you're saying!” He suddenly remembered that he had a pistol strapped to his waist, and his right hand flinched down towards it before he caught himself. If he grabbed it he would be dead for sure. “You can yell at me all you want, you overgrown housecat, but I don't have a goddamned clue what you want me to do!”

The Ailian opened her mouth wide, roaring at him. For a moment, Jack was sure that she was about to shoot him, and he stiffened, bracing himself. They faced each other down for a long minute, another breeze rushing through the clearing around Jack's crashed ship. Jack's eyes started to water from being open so long.

She opened her mouth again. “*Seresh te a'kr-*” She closed her mouth again, a low growl rumbling in her throat. She shuffled her feet impatiently, and Jack got the strange sense that she was trying to calm herself down. Her tail swished rapidly, dusting through the scattered leaves at her feet. Then she took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before speaking again.

“Sit,” she muttered. Her voice, speaking unexpectedly in English, had a strange accent to it, a

trilling tune that emphasized the hard “T” sound of the word. “You sit. Now. With hands on your head.”

Jack was sufficiently surprised enough that he immediately sat down. Looking up at the Ailian, he placed his hands on his head, relieved that he finally knew what she wanted him to do. Once he was situated, she advanced towards him, kicking his rifle away.

“You move...,” she said, coming behind him and kneeling, “...and I kill you. You understand now, yes?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jack said. “I get it.”

The Ailian set her rifle down, grabbing one of his arms in a powerful grip and jerking it roughly behind his back. From her belt she detached a length of strong black woven cord, which she used to tie his arms together. Drawing the free end of the cord down his back, she pulled his legs up underneath him so that he was kneeling, and then she tied the cord around his feet. When she was finished, he was trussed up securely in a kneeling position, unable to move very much at all. Jack felt a tug at his waist as she pulled his pistol from its holster, and she tucked it into her own belt. That done, she tugged him up, setting him down upright by the fire.

“Agh!” Jack yelped, pain blossoming at his shoulders at her rough treatment. “Bitch...” He was hoping for some kind of reaction from her at that, but she gave him no satisfaction.

She came back around him, carrying her rifle to the other side of the fire, where she sat. She stared at him, the hatred still burning in her eyes. Jack stared right back at her, defiant now that he was reasonably sure that she didn't mean to kill him, at least not yet. The Ailian had her rifle settled across her lap, though it would be easy enough for her to aim it back at him if he tried anything.

Jack took a moment to look her over. He had seen pictures of Ailians before, but he'd never given them too much thought. They were the enemy, but an enemy in a war that he'd counted himself out of almost eight years ago. She was tall, of course, and built very strongly. Her femininity was evident in much the same way it would have been in a human female, breasts and everything, and her body was curved in the same ways. The fur was the main difference, and the tail, as well as the shape of her head. She had a short, tiger-like muzzle with thin black lips and a black nose, and her furred head was crested by two short, pointed ears. Her eyes were an intense yellow, flecked with spots of gold, with thin catlike black pupils.

The Ailian appraised him in probably much the same way he was doing to her, with the difference that she maintained a calm air of superiority considering their situation. Finally, after about ten minutes of this, she spoke again.

“Name,” she hissed at him.

“What?”

She swung her rifle off of her lap, aiming it squarely at his chest. "Name. Your name. You will tell me."

Jack tilted his chin up. "You first."

"I tell you that already," the Ailian said. "Before. You tell me yours."

"And I already told you, I can't understand a word of your language," Jack said. He shrugged his shoulders as much as the cords would allow him. "If you want my name, I want yours."

"Could kill you now," she pointed out, flicking a switch on her weapon. A red sighting laser projected a gleaming dot on his chest. "Then your name not matter, yes?" She shrugged back at him, and she smiled for the first time, her white razor-sharp teeth gleaming.

Jack held her gaze, sweating a little, but he wasn't willing to risk that she might be serious. "Jack Squier," he said finally, grudgingly.

The Ailian switched off her targeting laser, laying the rifle across her lap again. "Good." She leaned back a little, curling her tail around her waist. She winced a little as her body tilted back, and Jack noticed for the first time that her flight suit was stained with wet patches of what looked like blood. "Why you are in this sector of space?"

"First tell me your name," Jack shot back at her. "I told you mine, so you tell me yours. Fair's fair."

"And I tell you I already say my name," she insisted again. "Be-"

"Yeah, I get it. You told me before." Jack was getting very frustrated with this woman. "And I told *you* before that I can't understand your language one bit. So if you happened to mention your name while we were blasting the shit out of each other in space, it kinda escaped me."

The Ailian gnashed her teeth for a few moments, internally debating her response. Jack wasn't entirely sure that she wasn't thinking of the best place to put a bullet hole in him, but then it seemed she took another calming breath.

"Aria Me'lia," she said. Her tail twitched. "Lieutenant Aria Me'lia." Aria nodded her head. "Now you have my name. You tell me why you are here. You are human military, yes?" She gestured at his clothing and his gun belt.

Jack shook his head. "No. Not anymore. I was once, but I'm a civilian cargo pilot. I work for a shipping company."

"Liar," Aria hissed at him. "You in restricted Ascendancy space! Regular humans do not go there. You tell the truth, yes?" She hefted her rifle threateningly, wincing again. Jack thought that some of the patches of blood on her flight suit were a little bigger than before.

"Bite me!" Jack yelled at her.

“Bite you?” she repeated back to him. She seemed genuinely confused by the phrase. “I could do that. These teeth go through your neck like bread.” She bared her teeth at him. “Unless you tell truth.”

“I *am* telling the truth!” Jack insisted. He cursed at himself for giving her a clever idea. “I’m a civilian cargo pilot. Okay, yeah, I was running military supplies, but on a civilian contract, not a military assignment! The path I was taking was just the quickest route to my rendezvous point with the Navy.” He paused, catching his breath after his rushed statement. He looked at Aria, gauging her reaction to his words.

After looking at him for several minutes, she sniffed the air. Jack got the impression that she was smelling his scent, and he wondered what sort of information she could gather from that. He wondered if she could smell fear.

“Truth,” she finally said, though she said it in a disappointed tone. She must have been hoping that she’d caught a spy or something like that. “You speak truth.” Jack let out a held breath. He watched as Aria seemed to slump a little. The patches of blood on her suit were definitely growing in size. She must have been injured worse than he had been in during her own crash landing. Jack was a little amazed that she was as strong as she was in the condition that she seemed to be in, and he shivered just a bit as he realized for the first time just how formidable an opponent an Ailian would be in combat.

“Uh...,” Jack said. He felt like a complete moron for wanting to ask the question he was about to ask. “Are you...uh...okay? You don’t look so good.”

Aria snarled at him. “You will be quiet.” But her voice was strained now. Jack knew she must have been pushing herself pretty hard to get to his crash site from her own. “Medical supplies. Where?”

“Well, which is it? You want me to be quiet or you want me to tell you where my medical supplies are?”

She picked up her rifle, thrusting the barrel towards him. He heard a click as she disengaged her safety. Jack moved to hold up his hands before remembering that they were tied behind his back.

“A joke,” he said weakly, trying to smile. “I was...uh...joking.” He jerked his head to one side. “They’re over there in the tent.”

Aria slung her rifle over her shoulder, standing with some effort and making her way to Jack’s tent. She pushed the flap aside, going in. As soon as she was out of sight, he started tugging on his bonds, trying to get his hands loose. After a few moments he gave up; she’d tied them far too tight, and struggling was only making them tighter. A moment later and she emerged from the tent, his medical kit in one hand. It was a military-grade kit with much more stuff in it than a simple shipboard first aid kit.

Without looking at Jack, Aria returned to her spot beside the fire. She set her rifle and the medical kit down. The first thing that she did was to open the kit and pull out an ampule of a painkilling drug, unscrewing the cap and then jabbing the ampule into her thigh through her clothes. Her face screwed up in pain, and then relaxed as the medication took hold. As Jack watched, she unzipped her flight suit down the front, pulling it from around her shoulders. Her upper body exposed to him, Jack couldn't stifle a gasp as he saw at least four nasty gashes across her torso, all of them bleeding freely. Besides that, she also had what looked like a scar from a previous wound, a long one that traced through the thin fur of her underbelly, from her collarbone down between her breasts and almost to her navel. Clearly she was no stranger to serious injury.

Biting her lip, Aria withdrew a disinfectant spray from the kit along with an electric wound sealer, the modern successor to the old-timey needle and thread. She sprayed disinfectant along the gashes. Switching the sealer on, she started drawing along the wounds. There was a hissing noise as the heat from the instrument slightly singed her fur, but the wounds closed cleanly, leaving behind only drying blood and a ragged line in her flesh as evidence that she'd been cut. When she was finished with her front she moved to her back, the thicker fur there giving her some difficulty. But she finished the job all the same, and she replaced the supplies in the kit before turning back to Jack.

She didn't bother to zip her flight suit back up, and Jack knew it was because she needed the wounds exposed to air before they would fully seal. He also got the feeling that she was trying to unnerve him, in which case she was succeeding. He averted his eyes. Even though she was his enemy, it didn't seem right to stare when she was...well...exposed.

"Now," Aria said, crossing her arms over her chest. "What I do with you, hm? We are stuck on this planet together, and you are prisoner."

"What the hell are you asking me for?" Jack shot back at her, glancing over. "You're the one with the gun. Seems to me like you get to give the orders, yeah?"

Aria looked back at him, her face impassive. Then she nodded once. "Well, yes." She crossed her legs, swishing her tail. She seemed much more at ease now that her wounds were attended to. "First thing. Your radio. Does it work?"

Jack blinked. "No, it doesn't. Whatever you did to it during the fight, you knocked it out completely. I tried using it as soon as I finished setting up my camp, and all I get is static on all channels." His face took on a dejected look. "Believe me, the first thing I wanted to do was call for help, but you ruined any chance of that, didn't you?"

Aria shrugged. "War. I do what I must, yes?" She uncrossed her legs, standing up and starting to pace back and forth. "Is too bad. What to do..." She paced for a while, lost in thought, paying Jack no

mind at all. Then she stopped, turning her head to look at him. “Well, then. If I want to leave this planet, I find my ship. Perhaps radio still work.”

Confused, Jack straightened himself as well as he could. “Find your ship? What do you mean, find your ship? You came from your ship to find mine, didn't you?”

Aria shook her head. Finally, she pulled her flight suit back up around her body, zipping it up. “No. I eject during crash. Escape pod take me away from ship. Far away, I think.” She nodded her head towards the edge of the clearing, a different direction than the one she'd come from. “All I know, somewhere that direction. Not know how far...Not even know if ship in one piece. But only chance to survive is go and see if radio works, call for help.”

“And so...what, you just leave me here to die?” Jack asked bitterly. “Tie me up and wait for some predator to finish me off? If you're gonna do that, just shoot me and be done with it.”

“No, not do that,” Aria said. She strode over to Jack, kneeling down in front of him. She looked into his face, an unreadable expression on hers. “You come with me. Help me find ship.”

Jack just looked at her, definitely not sure that he'd heard her correctly. Because there wasn't any way that she just said what he thought she'd said. She couldn't be serious.

“You're gonna have to repeat that one for me,” he said slowly.

“You help me find ship,” Aria said. She leaned back from him, sitting on her haunches with her hands on her knees. “I need working radio to call for rescue. You help me do it.”

“Uh...huh...,” Jack said slowly. He looked up, as though deep in thought. “Yeah, I'm gonna go ahead and say I'm not gonna do that.”

“Oh?” Aria said. She peered at him, tilting her head to one side. “Why not?”

“Why not?” Jack asked, incredulous. “Why not? I'll tell you why not! Because you've spent literally the entire time I've had the misfortune of being acquainted with you either trying to blow me out of space, shoot me down on an uninhabited planet, threatening to shoot me with a rifle, or tie me up. Because you've been talking to me like I'm some sort of servant or something. And because I just plain don't want to.” Jack looked away from her. “Give me one good reason why I should do that.”

Aria stood back up. “You want a reason?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I want a reason.”

“Alright.” Aria returned to her spot on the other side of the fire. “If we go alone, nobody to watch our backs. Predators, environmental hazards, nobody to help us through. Neither of us know this planet. Only way to survive is if we go together.” She raised a hand. “Easier.”

Jack rolled his eyes again. “Yeah, whatever.” But he knew she was right, even if he wasn't ready

to admit it to her just yet.

“Sleep on it,” Aria suggested. She stood up, walking to his tent. “Plenty of time to decide in morning. I ready for answer then.” She pushed aside the entrance flap.

“Wait a minute!” Jack called, struggling against his bonds again. “You just want me to sleep out here? I got no way to defend myself! What if some animal comes along and tries to make me its next meal.”

The Ailian looked back at him. “You still prisoner, remember?” She shrugged. “If anything come, you yell. I wake up, probably.” She pushed her way into the tent, zipping it up behind her.

“Probably? Bitch...” Jack sighed, looking around at his campsite, and the now-dying fire. “Not the way to convince me to partner up...” He settled in as best he could with his arms and legs tied behind him, and tried to sleep.

When Jack woke up, the planet's sun was shining down on him. Sometime during the night he'd slumped over, and he was lying on his side. He blinked, feeling a tremendous itch on his head. As his eyes opened wider, he realized that a ten-legged bug creature about the size of a drink coaster was crawling across his face, spiny legs pricking his skin.

“Gah, motherfucker!” he screamed, jerking upright and shaking his head back and forth wildly, trying to dislodge the bug. With every shake, its legs dug in tighter, stubbornly resisting. In desperation, Jack bit at the creature, and his teeth crunched it in half. The thing trembled, its legs tightening again before relaxing, and both half fell down onto the ground.

Jack spat, trying to get the bitter taste out of his mouth. His heart still pounding, he leaned back, trying not to look at the thing he'd basically started to eat for breakfast. He clenched his jaw, that familiar headache starting to throb again.

Just once...I mean, it's not that much to ask, is it? he thought to himself. *Can I wake up one time without being in pain?*

He took a few deep breaths, looking around the clearing. Everything seemed just as it had been the night before, except the fire was nothing but a pile of ashes. Just as he was considering yelling again, to try to wake up Aria, the tent opened up and she emerged. As Jack watched, she settled down on all fours, arching her back just like a cat would do after waking up. She stretched herself in this fashion for several minutes before standing and walking over to him.

“You yell, I wake up!” Jack snapped at her. He was feeling justifiably grumpy this particular morning. “Remember? You said that. Glad I wasn't dying out here. Some fucking help you are.”

Aria shrugged, looking vaguely apologetic. “Tired,” she said simply. She sat down next to him.

“Sleep well?”

Jack glared at her, his mouth opening and closing several times as he tried to think of something angry to say to her. When he thought about it, though, as tired as he had been he had slept pretty good, even considering the uncomfortable position he'd been in. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Good. Need your rest. Healthy.” Aria produced a can of preserved food. “Hungry?”

“I could eat.” Jack twisted his head around, trying to look at the ropes tied behind his back. “So, you gonna spoon feed me, or what?”

“Not your mother,” Aria said, her expression souring. “Feed yourself.” She came around to his other side, and Jack felt her tugging on the bonds around his hands. After a few moments his hands were free, and he flexed his muscles, trying to work the stiffness out of his wrists. “Now. You eat, and then-...!”

Her voice was cut off with a startled shriek as Jack grabbed the front of her flight suit, jerking her forward against his back. With his hands no longer bound to his feet, Jack could move his legs, and he drew them underneath his body and pushed back as hard as he could. Caught off guard, Aria tumbled backward with Jack coming down on top of her. She snarled, shooting a hand around his body and slamming a closed fist into his stomach.

“*Sika na po'krai!*” Aria hissed, as she struck him a second and then a third time. “Bastard!”

Jack coughed, fighting the urge to puke as she continued striking him in the stomach. He threw his head back and felt the back of his skull smash into her muzzle. A guttural noise issued from Aria's throat, and her hand stopped striking his stomach as she clutched her nose. Jack spun around, sitting on her stomach, and his hands reached for her throat.

“*Ka'a'lai!*”

Aria's hands found his throat first, and she tossed him off of her. Jack landed on his back ten feet away, the air whooshing out of his lungs as he hit hard. Before he could catch his breath again, Aria was on him, straddling his chest. She bent down, laying her forearm across his throat, pressing down none too gently.

“You have spirit,” she growled at him, shooting daggers with her eyes. The Ailian rubbed her free hand across her face, looking at her fingers. She flicked her tongue out, licking the blood that was slowly trickling from her nose. “That hurt.”

Jack tried to swallow. He was finding breathing difficult at the moment. “Yeah, well...you tied me up...and made me sleep outside...”

“*Po'krai!*” Aria spat the word at him. “Baby! In military training, I sleep outside for month! You sleep outside one night!”

She pressed her arm down harder, and Jack felt his airway close completely. He looked up at Aria, fighting as hard as he could just to draw a breath. His hands grabbed her arm, but she was a whole lot stronger than him and as hard as he pulled he wasn't making any headway. Jack could start to hear a rushing sound, and could feel his heartbeat thudding in his ears. His vision started growing fuzzy and his eyes rolled back. Just as he felt like he was about to pass out, Aria released the pressure on his neck and got up from his chest.

Jack sat up, clutching his throat and coughing, gasping for breath. For a long moment he couldn't do anything except breathe, grateful to feel the oxygen flooding into his lungs. He was vaguely aware of Aria going back to the tent, and she emerged shortly thereafter, tossing a spoon at him. It hit his chest and bounced into his lap.

"Eat," she snarled at him, gesturing to the can of food which had been forgotten on the ground. "I gather supplies." The Ailian stood there for several minutes, breathing hard, her tail swishing back and forth angrily. "You do that again, I kill you." She turned her back to him, going to the wreckage of the *Star's Eye*.

Feeling beaten, Jack picked up the spoon and the can of food. He pried the top off, looking inside at the unappetizing mix of compressed meat and vegetables. Not the breakfast he would have chosen for himself, but it would have to do. Feeling slightly relieved that she hadn't just killed him outright for his escape attempt, he forced himself to eat.

A short while later, Jack was finished with his breakfast, and Aria was still gathering up supplies from his camp and from the *Star's Eye*. She'd taken apart the tent, bundling it back up and setting it with the rest of what she'd gathered. Jack had watched her warily the entire time, but she didn't take her eyes off him for more than a few minutes at a stretch. If he'd had a desire to make another escape attempt, he doubted he would have gotten very far. And in any case, he wasn't entirely sure that he wanted to escape anymore.

Jack had been considering Aria's little proposal since the previous evening, and he had to admit that she'd had a point. If his own ship couldn't be used as a means to get off this planet, at least not without considerable repairs, then their best chance would be to find her ship and try to call for help. By Aria's own admission, she had no idea where exactly the crash site of her ship was, other than a vague notion of the direction in which it lay. Therefore, it stood to reason that the distance to cover might be fairly lengthy.

He looked off in the direction Aria had indicated the previous night. The forest beyond was thick, as far as he could see. The entire time Jack had been here, he'd heard the noises of creatures

unknown moving through the trees. On an uninhabited planet, the wildlife was sure to be unlike anything either of them had seen before. There was no telling what kinds of predators might be out there, and it wasn't just predators one had to worry about. Even the prey species might be dangerous in their own ways.

And, Jack thought, looking down at the crumbled remnants of the massive bug that had so rudely awakened him, if this little fellow is any indication, the fauna here is likely to be large.

What that boiled down to, Jack was realizing, was that going it alone would be tantamount to suicide. If Aria was reluctant to do the same, considering how much more formidable she seemed to be than he, that just increased his own reluctance. While he certainly wasn't much of a fan of the way Aria was treating him so far, she was a fighter. If it meant survival, Jack supposed he could deal with the attitude.

Breaking himself out of his quiet consideration, Jack looked to Aria. She seemed to have finished with her gathering of supplies. The Ailian had packed up two large backpacks with various items. In one pack she'd collected medical supplies, ammunition, batteries, and a small portable solar generator. The other pack was stuffed with preserved food, military rations, and toiletries. Strapped onto the top of each pack was a bedroll, and the smaller pack also had the tent attached to it.

Noticing that he had finished, Aria slowly reapproached Jack. He sat up straight, keeping a close eye on her, readying himself in case she had any ideas of starting their fight back up. But she seemed to have calmed herself down, and she just lowered to a seated position in front of him. A cool, pleasant breeze blew through the crash site, and Jack smoothed down his blonde hair as the wind mussed it up somewhat. At the same time, Aria raised a hand to her head, smoothing down the fur between her ears. She caught herself, lowered her hand, and grinned at him.

"So," she said simply.

Jack raised his eyebrows, waiting for her to say something else. She was just staring at him with those piercing yellow eyes of hers. Impatient, Jack cleared his throat. "So, what?"

"So, you think of what I say, yes?" Aria asked him. The tip of her tail twitched. "About finding my ship. You will come with me?"

Jack rubbed his chin. "Well...ah...that depends."

"On?"

"What are you planning to do with me once we get to where we're going?" Jack pressed her. "You say you want to use the radio to call for help. I'm assuming that means you're going to call the Ascendancy and tell them where you are so a rescue ship can pick you up." Aria nodded. "So, then, what happens to me? I don't much fancy becoming a prisoner of war."

“Are one already,” Aria pointed out. “Besides. Rather be prisoner of war and alive, or left on uncharted planet and dead?”

“Ah...Point taken.” Jack thought for a few more moments. “One other thing. How do I know you won't just kill me when you've got help on the way?”

Aria looked surprised by that question. “Kill you? Why?”

Jack cocked an eye at her. “Uh...You've already threatened to do that several times. I wouldn't call it out of the realm of possibility.” He crossed his arms. “I've got to know that I'm going to be alive at the end of this little journey.”

The Ailian leaned back from him, smiling again. Jack realized that she was appraising him again, as though seriously considering the idea that killing him would be a possibility. She touched a hand to her nose where he'd bashed her earlier, brushing away a small bit of crusted blood. Then she crossed her arms, nodding to him.

“You have spirit,” she pronounced. “You are not soldier, but still a good fighter, I think. You have fear, but you are also smart. This is good.” Aria leaned forward, placing a hand on his shoulder and looking him in the eye. “You help me, assist me well, and I not kill you. You trust me on this, yes?”

Jack snorted with laughter. “I don't think I trust you.”

Aria's face darkened, and she bared her teeth, emitting a low growl.

“But,” Jack continued, holding up a hand, “at this point I don't see any other options. I guess we'll go together.”

Aria's face lightened again, and she grinned. “Good choice.” She reached out a hand to him, crooking her fingers. Sharp claws extended, and she hooked them around the cord binding his feet together, cutting it and freeing his legs. Aria stood up, turning her back to him and going to the packs. Jack stretched his legs out in front of him, working the soreness out of his muscles. With a grunt he stood as well, following her.

“Here,” Aria said, handing him the smaller of the two backpacks. “Carry this. Not too heavy, is it?”

Jack grabbed the pack from her and hefted it onto his back, placing the straps over his shoulders. The bag was brutally heavy, but he thought he could manage it. And it would get lighter as their trip went on. “No. I can handle this.”

“Good,” Aria said. She strapped the larger bag to her back easily. Over one shoulder she slung Jack's rifle, securing it to her backpack with a clip so that it wouldn't swing as she walked. She picked up her own, larger rifle, holding it across her chest. Jack waited expectantly.

“Aren't you forgetting something?” he prompted her.

Aria pondered that for a moment. "No. Not think so."

Jack patted the empty holster on his belt. "Don't I at least get my gun back?"

The laughter from Aria in response to his question echoed around the clearing. Her laugh was rather melodious, with an undertone of a purring, rumbling noise. She shook her head at Jack as though he was a simple child making a ridiculous request of his parent. "Of course not."

"Why not? Who knows what we'll find out there? I need to be able to defend myself."

Aria shrugged, still chuckling. "Like you say. Not trust you." She thumped him on the back, nearly sending him sprawling on the ground from the weight of his backpack. "You carry supplies, I carry weapons. Not worry. We stay together. You get in trouble, I protect us."

Jack wasn't sure he liked that at all, but he wasn't really in a position to argue the point. "Um...If you say so, Aria."

"Very good, Jack. We go now, yes?"

"Just one question before we go."

Aria sighed, tapping her foot impatiently. "Quick question, I am hoping."

"Yeah." Jack adjusted the strap on his backpack, taking in the slack so it sat more securely on his back. He looked up at her. She really was quite a bit larger than him, especially since she was carrying a pack nearly twice the size of his. "If I'd said no, what would you have done?"

Aria looked down at him, grinning widely. "What you think? Smart soldier does not leave enemy alive at her back."

Smirking, Jack nodded. "I had a feeling you'd say that."

Slapping his back again, Aria started walking, heading in the direction of where her ship supposedly would be. "Come. Midday soon, I think. Will be hot. Need to be moving."

Jack watched her as she walked off, her tail swishing with the sway of her hips. She seemed a lot more confident than he was, or maybe she was just good at hiding her true feelings. The Ailian had to be just as nervous as he was, even though she'd obviously seen far more of war than he had. Anyone would be apprehensive going off into unknown territory. Both of them far from home, and far from anyone who could give them aid. Jack shook his head.

I just know I'm going to regret this.

Hitching up his pack, he hurried to catch up to the briskly walking female, as they left the clearing and headed into the alien forest. Off in the distance, he heard a long, dull roar.