

-Transmission Lost-
Chapter Three: The Forest
by Havoc

“Hang on...Gotta...Gotta sit for a minute...”

Turning her head to look, Aria gave a quiet growl of frustration as she halted for the second time. She walked the few paces back to where Jack had taken a seat, perched on a large rock in a spot shaded by the thick canopy of trees overhead. Jack swung his pack off his back, setting it on the ground next to him. He took off his hat, then wiped the sheen of sweat off of his forehead before putting it back on.

“Second time you stop today,” Aria said to him. She sat down on another rock near him. Jack noticed that she wasn't even breathing hard. “I maybe regretting bringing you along.” Aria laid her rifle against her seat, taking her tail in one hand and picking a few stray bits of dry leaf out of her fur.

Jack pulled a water bottle from his bag and took a long pull. “Look, Aria, you might be used to this kind of thing,” he said, “but it's been ten years since I was in the military and had to do anything like this. I'm just a little out of conditioning.”

The Ailian glared at him. “You make excuses. You show me conditioning just fine this morning.” She pointed a finger at her nose, which was still slightly swollen from where he'd headbutted her. “You just lazy, I think.”

“You can think whatever you want. This planet is hot and it's muggy. You can't drive me like a slave and expect me to not need to rest every now and then.”

“Every now and-!” Aria waved a hand back towards the direction they'd come from, exasperated. “We walk less than four hours! You stop twice.”

“And I'm carrying a pack that's got to weight a hundred pounds at least,” Jack pointed out. He took another swig of water. “Be thankful I've *only* stopped twice.” He wiped his mouth, putting his water bottle back, then jumped as he heard a rustling in a nearby clump of bushes. “What the hell was that?”

“Peace,” Aria said. She picked up her rifle slowly, aiming it carefully at the bushes.

The rustling continued for several seconds, and then the bushes parted. Aria started to squeeze the trigger, but she stopped when she saw what had been causing the noise. A small, four-legged creature emerged from the vegetation, one of a species that they had seen several times since starting into the alien forest. The creature was about a meter long with a short tail and long black fur. It had a flat face, and a small pointed tooth protruded from each corner of its mouth. Though they seemed to be

curious, Jack and Aria had quickly discovered that they were harmless. The ones they had seen had been more concerned with nipping leaves from the low plants than bothering them.

As they watched, the creature slowly approached Aria, sniffing the air and gazing at her with shiny black eyes. It got within perhaps two feet of her before it stopped, its nose twitching. Baring her teeth, Aria growled at it, and the little animal's fur stood on end before it turned around and shot off into the woods. Jack smirked at her.

“That wasn't very nice of you. Poor little thing.”

Aria turned to him. “Better for us. Small animals attract big animals. Haven't seen big animals yet, would prefer not to.” She stood back up. “We start walking again, now, yes?”

Standing up as well, Jack sighed. He picked his pack up, strapping it back on. “I suppose. Lead the way, your majesty...”

The forest had grown dark before Aria finally called a halt. Jack was wiped out, and he was grateful that he could finally take a real rest. His relief was short-lived, however, because Aria immediately put him to work setting up an overnight campsite for them. While she gathered up some fallen wood to build a fire, Jack put together the tent and dug out a small hole as a makeshift fire pit. After the wood was gathered, Jack got the fire going and they both sat down to eat.

The meal, as each meal they'd had since setting off, was canned rations. As much as human technology had advanced through the centuries, Jack had to admit that one area which was still lacking was military food. All that anyone ever seemed to do was just mix meat with vegetables and pack it into cans. As they ate, he was about to comment on it when Aria beat him to it.

“*Ta'kri...*,” she muttered, looking in disgust at the unappetizing mush she was forcing herself to eat. “Human food not good at all. No wonder you all so short.” Her pointed ears twitched at a noise off in the forest, but whatever it was didn't seem to be close and she turned her attention back to her meal.

Jack shrugged. “Well, it's military food. It's meant to fill you up, not pleasure your taste buds.” He choked down another bite. “I imagine it's the same with the Ailian military.”

Aria stared at him for a few seconds, then she gave a low rumbling chuckle, presenting the first genuine smile he'd seen so far. There was something almost friendly about it. Almost. “True enough, I think.”

For the rest of the meal they ate in silence, listening to the sounds of the forest. Both of them were appreciative of the campfire; while the daytime had been very hot, the night was quickly growing cooler. Jack knew it would be a good idea to keep the fire going all night. Luckily, Aria had gathered enough wood that he figured that wouldn't be a problem.

Swallowing his last bite, Jack set the empty can aside. "You know, ah...there's a question I've been meaning to ask you."

"Mm?" Aria twitched her tail, looking a little curious. "A question?"

"Yeah." He crossed his legs. "I was wondering how you learned to speak English. There aren't many humans who can speak Ailian, and I never bothered to try to learn when I was in the service. But you speak English really well."

"Oh..." Aria shrugged, and she rubbed the back of her neck. For the first time since he'd met her, she looked a little embarrassed. "Thank you. I not very good, really..."

"No, I'm serious, you speak it a lot better than I would have expected."

"Thank you," she said again. Aria took a final bite from her can, then she set it down. If she had any more of the foul mixture, she might be sick. "Well...Sometimes when Ascendancy raids human colony, take prisoners. Force prisoners to teach us language." She rubbed the back of her neck again. "Need to know language to understand human radio signals. Threaten death if they refuse. Not many say no, yes?"

"...I guess they wouldn't." The small amount of friendliness that Jack had been starting to feel quickly evaporated. "You Ailians seem to have a talent for threatening to kill someone if they don't do what you want."

Aria bristled at that. "And humans have talent for taking what not theirs."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked. He clenched his hands. "If you're referring to our colonial expansion, we had no idea that any of the planets we colonized were in Ailian space. We didn't even know that there was any other life out there!" He pointed a finger accusingly at Aria. "And your people attacked us without any warning at all."

"Attack was warning!" Aria shot back. "Humans should have left. Instead you keep expanding, keep fighting. We have to take war to next level to protect what is ours!"

"And we had to keep fighting to save our colonists' lives!"

"*Pah! Ka'la se te nai!*" Aria stood up, striding quickly past Jack. "Stupid. Is like arguing with child."

"And where are you going?" Jack called, looking over his shoulder.

"Sleep." Aria knelt in front of the tent, unzipping the flap. "I stay awake much longer, I do something stupid. Humans make me angry." She crawled inside and zipped the tent back up, but not before tossing out Jack's sleeping roll. Obviously, she meant for Jack to sleep outside again. As long as that meant Jack wasn't going to have sleep next to an angry tiger, that was just fine with him.

Shaking his head, Jack turned back towards the fire, watching the flames dance as the burning

wood crackled. He reached for the pile of firewood and tossed a few more sticks into it. He stared at the conflagration until his eyes started to water, and then he leaned back, tipping over until he was lying on the ground. Jack looked up at the sky through the treetops, where stars were twinkling peacefully.

His thoughts turned to the war, and for the first time in ten years he found himself wondering what his life would have been like if he'd stayed in the Navy. Certainly he wouldn't be in the situation he was in now. Jack smiled as he remembered what life had been like, traveling with his squadron in their escort carrier. The life had been fun, in its own way. They'd travel from planet to planet, usually along with a transport convoy or some passenger ship carrying minor dignitaries. He'd never had to be in what one would call a dangerous war zone. It hadn't been such a bad time, had it?

The night life for a fighter pilot had been pretty special, too. Every time he walked into a bar in uniform, people had turned to look at him and his fellow pilots, like they were celebrities or something. It was something that hadn't changed since the first human took to the skies in a theater of war. Those who flew craft into combat were seen as daredevils, and like all daredevils their bravery impressed the masses. None of the women who Jack had ever gone home with after a night of drinking had cared that he'd never seen a shot fired in anger. To them, the image and the fantasy had been enough.

I probably could have put in a few more years, Jack thought as he lay there. Saved up a little more, qualified for a better pension. Then I wouldn't have had to take a job like the one that got me into this mess...

Yawning, exhausted from the day, Jack sat back up. He retrieved his bedroll from where Aria had thrown it and brought it over to the fireside. Kicking his boots off, Jack unbuttoned his fatigue shirt, rolling it up to use as a pillow. He laid down next to the fire, making himself as comfortable as he could.

Aria might be pretty abrasive...but I do have to respect that she did this kind of thing for a whole month straight...

Perhaps two or three hours later, Jack drifted awake. He sat up, pleasantly surprised that there weren't any giant insects crawling across his face. Looking to the fire, he saw that it had nearly gone out, and the night was growing quite chilly. He got up from his bedroll and walked over to where Aria had stacked the firewood, and he retrieved several large sticks. Jack tossed them onto the fire, using another stick to poke them about until the fire started to build again.

Jack leaned back, propping himself up on his arms, taking a few moments to enjoy the warmth and the quiet of the night. There was no noise from the tent; Aria seemed to be sleeping just as deeply as she had the night before. It was kind of a relief not to have to deal with her constant threats and

verbal abuse.

I had a feeling I might regret coming along with her, Jack said to himself. He laid back on the ground. *But I guess I didn't have much choice, did I? It was either come with her or die.*

With an irritated snort, Jack closed his eyes to try to get back to dreamland. The crackling of the fire was soothing, and the cheeping of something that sounded rather like a cricket echoed somewhere in the trees. Even so, Jack found that sleep was coming difficult to him this night. A small rustling noise came from the tent, sounding as though Aria was shifting in her sleep.

“...I need a piss.”

Standing up, Jack walked a ways away from the fire, a short distance into the trees. It was dark there, but a little light from the fire still filtered through. Finding a suitable tree, Jack unzipped his pants and got down to business. An unbelievable sense of relief washed over him. It was amazing how one could forget to see to the baser necessities of life under extreme stress. When he finished, he zipped his pants back up and turned to walk back to the campsite.

A soft noise nearby made him stop, and he turned towards it curiously. Emerging from a small clump of low plants was one of the little black creatures. The light from the fire illuminated its fur, which had a shimmering sheen to it in the darkness. The animal was gazing at Jack with just as much curiosity as he directed towards it. Slowly it started to approach him, moving cautiously with each step.

“Uh...Hey, there, little guy,” Jack said uncertainly. He turned towards the animal, which made it halt. Jack froze, worried that if he moved too quickly he'd set off some sort of defensive behavior. As small as the animal was, Jack still didn't feel like getting into a fight with it. As soon as he stopped moving, however, the animal continued approaching him. It was wagging its short tail back and forth.

Huh...seems kind of friendly..., Jack thought. He knelt down on the ground and boldly held a hand out. The creature paused for a second, then stretched its neck out, sniffing at him. It took another few steps forward. His hand shaking a little, Jack touched his fingers to the top of its head. When it made no apparently hostile reactions, Jack scratched behind its stubby ears. It made a small cackling/purring noise, its eyes closing halfway, and it tilted its head against his hand in apparent enjoyment.

“Well, you're a friendly little guy,” Jack said. He rubbed his hand down its back, and the creature arched itself up to meet his touch. “Nice to know there's at least one species on this planet that doesn't seem to mind people.” He continued petting the black-furred animal, listening to the happy-sounding noises it was making.

Suddenly, the creature went silent, and it stood up on its hind legs. Puzzled, Jack looked around, unable to sense anything. The little animal was shaking nervously, turning its head this way and that,

and it started making a little whining noise. Jack continued looking around, his ears and eyes straining to perceive anything in the depths of the forest.

A hair-raising shriek made him nearly leap out of his skin, and the black-furred creature bolted for the trees. Before it had gotten a meter away from him, a large, mottled-green blur whipped by Jack's head. He yelled in shock and took a few steps back, tripping on a tree root and falling right on his ass. He watched as whatever had just leaped past him chased after the smaller creature, which was climbing up the nearest tree trunk.

The larger animal howled in frustration as its prey escaped up the tree. Jack got a good look at it as it stood at the base of the tree, staring up at the escaped animal. The predator was huge, easily as big as Jack and maybe just a little bigger. Like the smaller animal, it had four legs, but the similarities stopped there. Twin tails extended from its haunches, each of them tipped with a wicked-looking short blade of what looked like blackened bone or horn. The blades glimmered in the firelight, shining with a natural polish. Each of the beast's four paws ended in short, slightly curved claws. The most fearsome part of it was its muzzle, which was longer than a wolf's and was filled with twin rows of sharp, shark-like teeth. The animal was covered with fur in a pattern of green, brown, and black, the perfect natural camouflage.

Just as Jack was thinking that he should get away before the beast noticed him, it turned its eyes towards him. It had four of them, set in two rows on its head, and they were all pure blue with no apparent pupils. The predator blinked all of its eyes, then bared its teeth and slowly advanced towards Jack, snarling as saliva dripped from its mouth. Swallowing, he looked around for a way out, and spotted a hefty fallen branch nearby. He seized it, quickly standing up.

The predator continued its advance, not intimidated in the slightest by the addition of a weapon to the mix. Without any warning or telegraphing of its intentions, it pounced at Jack, whipping its twin tails towards him. Jack jumped out of the way as one of the tails slashed by his face with millimeters to spare. With a shout, he swung his branch wildly, catching the creature with a glancing blow across its flank. Landing on the ground, it quickly turned to face him again, the fur along its back raising in anger.

"Come on, you," Jack muttered. The beast was now standing between him and the campsite. He took a step towards it, swinging the branch menacingly. It jumped back half a step, wary now of being struck again. Gritting his teeth, Jack advanced, raising his branch to strike.

Which was exactly what the predator was waiting for. With a flash of its tails, it struck him square across the chest with the unbladed side of both appendages, throwing him back to the ground and knocking the branch from his grip. Before Jack could even think about getting up again, the beast

was on him, its claws digging into his shoulders as it mounted his chest. Terrified, Jack struck wildly at its head, striking it multiple times with no visible effect. The animal continued snarling and roaring, trying to get its jaws in a position to bite at his face. In desperation, Jack placed his hand under its neck, pushing with all his might to keep its teeth as far away from him as possible. His muscles strained, his arms slowly bending as the predator forced its head closer and closer to its target.

“*Ka'a'lai!*”

A piercing, shrieking panther-like roar echoed around the forest. Jack gasped as the predator was thrown off of him. It landed on its back a few meters away from him, rolling back and forth in confusion before flipping itself onto its feet.

Growling, her teeth bared in a snarl, Aria planted herself on all fours over Jack's body, her tail whipping back and forth in the air. She pawed at the ground, her claws extended, staring the predator down. The animal whipped its tails in her direction, trying to goad her into coming for it. She kept her protective stance over Jack, refusing to move an inch.

Barking in anger, the predator took a step towards them, and Aria struck. She pounced on the beast, wrapping her arms around its body. With her feet she pinned both of its tails to the ground and starting raking her front claws down its flanks, opening up huge gashes in its furred flesh. The animal howled in sudden pain and dismay, rolling itself back and forth to try to break free of her grasp, but Aria held fast to it and didn't give it any chance to escape. As Jack watched, she pinned its neck to the ground and reached for her belt, drawing out his pistol. Before the animal had a chance to react, she pressed the muzzle to the side of its head and fired a single shot.

The beast stiffened up with one startled yip, twitched its tails in a few dying thrashes, and then lay still as its last breath hissed through its teeth. Panting, Aria tucked the pistol back into her belt and stood up, taking a step from the corpse.

Sitting up shakily, Jack caught his breath. “Aria, you...I don't know what to...Thank you.”

Growling, Aria turned towards him and walked over with long strides. “*Aresh kal'a'ri me tok!*” she hissed at him. She grabbed him by the front of his undershirt, hauling him to his feet. She backhanded him brutally, drawing blood from his cheek.

Jack was stunned. “What the hell was *that* for?”

“Idiot! Stupid!” Aria was seething, he eyes alight with fury. “What you thinking, wandering from camp? Could have been killed! *Tok le pu'ra me!*” She smacked him again, then let his shirt go, and he collapsed back to the ground. The Ailian stood over him, quivering in rage.

Jack didn't quite know what to say. This anger was extreme, even for her, and right now he was even more scared than he had been when he'd first encountered her.

Aria continued shaking, her tail whipping the leaves at her feet, and she cupped her face in her hands. For a few minutes she just stood there, not making any sounds, and Jack watched her warily, wondering what was coming next. Then she dropped her hands to her sides, closed her eyes, and took a few deep breaths. When she opened her eyes again, her anger seemed not to have diminished, but she looked more in control of herself. She turned, walking back in the direction of their camp.

“Get up, come,” she said over her shoulder to him. “We have work to do.”

“W-Work?” Jack asked, shakily standing up and following after her.

“Yes. Need to bury animal. Will attract more if left out. Come.” Aria led Jack back to the camp, and retrieved a collapsible shovel from each of their packs. She handed one to Jack and they returned to the dead predator. They dug a deep hole, and Jack rolled the corpse into it, filling it in and covering it with leaf litter. When they were finished they returned to the camp once more and put away the shovels. The fire was still crackling merrily, and Aria tossed two more sticks onto it. She sat down in front of the fire, staring into the flames.

Jack hesitated for a few moments, then he sat down as well, opposite her. After almost thirty minutes of silence, other than the popping and hissing of the fire, Jack spoke.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “You saved my life. I'd be dead if it wasn't for you.”

Aria snapped her head up, her eyes glinting in the light. For a heartbeat it seemed as though she was about to snap at him again, but then she looked back down. “Welcome. When I wake up and you not there, I think you run away. Come look for you.” She smirked just a little bit. “Lucky I wake up this time, yes?”

“Y-Yeah,” Jack agreed, laughing nervously.

The female sat for a little longer, then she stood, walking around the fire. As she passed Jack, she paused and laid a hand on his shoulder. “I go back to bed. You sleep, too. We leave soon after sunrise, yes? Need to keep moving.”

“Right...,” Jack agreed. “And...uh...Thanks, again.” He put a hand to his face, feeling a sting and a small wet patch of blood where she'd struck him.

Aria looked down at him, and gave a small smile. As she walked past his pack, she stopped and pulled out the medkit. She came back to Jack, opening it up, and she knelt next to him. Taking a disinfectant wipe, she swiped it over the small cut on his cheek and then put a bandage on it. Aria stood back up and then vanished into her tent.

Touching the fresh bandage on his face, Jack looked after her, and not for the first time he thought to himself that she was one hard woman to figure out.

The next day they got an early start, just as Aria had said. She made no mention of the previous night's event, and Jack wasn't in any mood to remind her about it. They took more breaks than they had the previous day. The pair had seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement that Aria would not complain about his needs for rest, so long as he didn't complain about the work.

As the day passed into afternoon, the forest started to grow thinner, becoming less of a rainforest and more of a semi-tropical area. Jack noticed that they were starting to go downhill, too, which was a welcome relief. As the going got a little easier, both of their moods improved, and Aria's death threats became less frequent.

On one of their breaks, while they sat in the shade of a tree, Aria even started talking to him in a conversational way. "So, Jack. You from Earth, yes? Or born on a colony?"

Jack was a little taken aback by this friendly line of speech. "Uh...I was born on Europa, but my family moved back to Earth when I was five. So both, I guess."

Aria nodded. "Which you like better, colony or home planet?"

"I dunno," Jack said, shrugging. "I don't really remember Europa all that well. I grew up on Earth, and that's what I'm used to." He leaned back against the tree.

"Have family on Earth?"

Jack nodded. "Some. My mother and father are still there. My brother lives on Mars, working in the uranium mining industry there. I have an older sister, too...She's in the Navy somewhere out there, I'm not sure where." He paused. "I'm not sure I'd want to tell you where, actually, even if I did know. I probably shouldn't even have mentioned that."

"Is okay." Aria waved a hand. "Ascendancy already knows most of where human military is. No harm."

Jack relaxed a little. *Of course*, he thought. *After all, it's not like she can do anything about it. We're stuck on this planet.* He turned his head to look at Aria. "What about you, Aria? Where are you from? You have any family out there?"

She looked away from him, off into the distance. Jack was about to repeat the question when she stood, hefting her rifle and swinging her pack back onto her back. "No more talk." She nodded up to the sky. "Sunset in a few hours. Need to keep moving before dark."

Blinking, Jack stood as well. "Uh, yeah...Sure." He picked up his backpack. "On your lead."

About two hours later, they came to a flat area with a wide river running through it. Jack set up their campsite near the water while Aria refilled their canteens. When she came back, Jack saw that she also had a few strange-looking fish in her hands. They sort of resembled salmon, but they were longer

and had far more fins than fish on Earth would have. Still, it would be nice to have something to eat other than canned rations, for a change.

Aria got a fire going and cooked the fish, and they ate. The fish had a pleasant, nutty flavor to them when they were cooked, and they were very tender and flaky. For a little while, Jack could almost imagine that he was just on a camping trip with a friend, instead of on a march for survival with what should have been his worst enemy. There was no more conversation as there had been earlier in the day, but at least there wasn't any hostility.

When the meal was finished, Aria took the remnants and carried them down to the river, tossing them into the water to be carried away. The sun was very low, almost below the horizon, and it was nearly time for bed. As Aria walked back, Jack was setting up his bedroll outside to sleep.

"Bedtime, yes?" Aria asked. Jack nodded, stifling a yawn. "Good. We sleep, ready for more walking in morn-!"

Jack fell backwards in shock as an animal, nearly identical to the one that had attacked him the night before, leaped over his head. One of its tails smacked him as it passed, and he was sent sprawling as it made a beeline for Aria. Taken by surprise, Aria was tackled to the ground by the beast. Jack sat upright, his head spinning, as Aria hissed and roared, fighting with the creature.

His heart racing, Jack scrambled to his feet, taking a few steps towards Aria. An echoing howl, not so far off, froze him in his tracks.

Jesus Christ, more of them? he thought frantically. Now he was terrified. Aria heard the howl too, and a second later there was another howl, closer this time. She dealt the beast a punishing blow to the side of the head, stunning it momentarily. Right before it recovered, she looked at Jack, baring her fangs.

"Go!" she snarled at him. The predator snapped its fangs at her, and Aria jerked her head away just in time to save her nose. "Go! Before more come. Run. I follow when done!" The animal whipped a tail around at the side of her head, and Jack made a motion towards Aria. But she caught the tail in one of her hands and pinned it down, looking back at Jack once more. "*Po'krai!* Do not stand there like a fool! *Run!*"

Shuffling his feet in indecision, finally Jack turned and ran as fast as his tired legs could carry him. The howls of what sounded like a pack of those creatures were behind him, along with the snarls and roars of Aria as she fought. Jack kept running, not looking back, terrified for his life and trying not to think about what would happen if any of those animals caught up with him.

Before long, the sounds faded until all he could hear was faint echoes. As the skies grew darker, Jack felt his legs burning.

And he kept running, running, and running.