

-Transmission Lost-
Chapter Four: An Understanding
by Havoc

As Jack ran, he could still faintly hear the sounds behind him of Aria and the fight she was having with the pack of wild animals. He was running through the trees, almost directly back along the path they'd come from during the day. Darkness was falling, and he was having trouble retracing his steps, tripping over roots and slipping on leaves. Every now and then he looked over his shoulder, but a howl would freeze his heart and he'd put on a burst of speed. Before long he could barely hear any more, could barely hear anything except the sound of his own breath.

"Okay, I...," Jack gasped, gradually coming to a stop, bending over with exertion. "I can't run anymore..." He leaned back against a tall tree, fighting to catch his breath.

For several long minutes, Jack just stood there breathing and listening to the thudding of his heartbeat. He was shaking with terror. Fighting in a ship up in space was one thing, but Jack had no idea how to fight hand-to-hand. He could shoot a gun alright, but against creatures that could tear him to shreds in a flash, he wasn't sure what he could do.

He wasn't like Aria. Last night, when she'd come looking for him and had pulled that animal off of him, she'd demonstrated much better fighting skills than Jack had ever dreamed of having. It had taken her only seconds to put that predator down. Now she was fighting an entire pack of them by herself. Jack knew she was tough, but he had no idea if she could...

Standing up straight, Jack blinked, looking around at where he was. "What the *hell* am I doing?" he asked aloud. "I just abandoned her!"

Jack wasn't all that fond of Aria, but at the very least he felt some sense of gratitude to her. After experiencing what the planet had to offer for a few days, he was certain that he would not have survived this long if it hadn't been for her help. In fact, just the night before she had literally saved his life, when he'd been attacked by one of those creatures. Sure, she had really let him have it for going off alone so far into the woods, but the Ailian had patched up his wounds afterward. Obviously she cared enough to want to keep him alive, even if she did have self-serving reasons for it.

Which was more care than he'd showed, just running off like a coward, just like Aria had thought he was from the beginning. He was proving her right. Jack would be goddamned if he'd let her be right about one more thing.

Jack turned back around, running right back in the direction he'd just come from. *She saved my life, and I ran off and left her there. I don't give a damn what she told me to do, I'm going back there.*

The human wasn't sure what he'd do once he got back, but he had plenty of time to think while he ran.

Back at the campsite, Aria was in serious trouble. Three of the demon-like creatures lay dead at her feet, oozing dark blood from claw wounds and bullet holes in their bodies. Jack's sidearm lay cast aside on the ground, slide locked back on an empty chamber. Aria cursed at herself for having forgotten to take the spare magazines from his belt. She desperately wished to be holding her own rifle in her hands, but it was at the tent along with the human rifle she'd taken from Jack, and four of the ravenous beasts stood guard between it and her. They'd been there ever since the first time she'd tried to make a break for her weapon. They may have looked like dumb animals, but it seemed they possessed more intelligence than she'd previously thought.

Aria growled, wiping blood from a cut above her eyes. Five more creatures were circled around her, whipping their twin tails against the ground, anxious for their turn to get at her. She slowly turned herself around, looking among them, evaluating which one was the weakest link, the easiest to take out before setting in on the others. Aria drew her knife from her belt, fitting it in a backhanded grip, blade facing out.

“*Sus kal-fe a'lash...*,” she hissed, trying to goad the animals into making their move. She flicked her tail, the fur on the back of her neck raised and her teeth exposed.

In a flash, the predator in front of her launched itself through the air towards her. Aria drew her arm back and then thrust it forward, plunging the knife deep into its chest. The demon howled in agony, its tails hanging limply. Aria withdrew her knife, ready to stab again, and then another beast jumped on her back from behind. With a howl, it reared its head back and then clamped its jaws over her right shoulder. The Ailian screamed and her right arm went numb, the knife dropping from her hand. She swatted her left hand across her body, raking her claws over the offending creature's face. It barked, releasing her shoulder, and she clutched its neck and hurled it off of her.

Gasping, Aria clutched her shoulder. There was no feeling in it whatsoever, but the sensation of fire was spreading across the rest of her body. She grit her teeth and looked around on the ground for her knife. Before she found it, a third demon leapt at her, planting its front paws on her chest and taking her to the ground. With barely any time to catch her breath, Aria wrestled with it, trying to ignore the burning feeling spreading over her body.

A-...Ara ke na me'resh..., Aria thought to herself. *I cannot take much more of this...*

With as much strength as she could muster, Aria unsheathed the claws from her left hand and grabbed the predator atop her by the throat. She dug her claws in, piercing its neck deeply. Twisting her

wrist she opened up its neck, and there was a trio of sharp cracks as its spine splintered. Blood drenched her front and the animal went limp. Panting, Aria rolled its body off of her, sitting up with great difficulty. Her vision growing cloudy as numbness washed over her body from her shoulder, she surveyed the area. Three more demons lay dead around her. Two left out of the group that had surrounded her. If Aria was careful and swift, she thought she could manage that.

And then two of the animals from the group blocking access to the tent joined the pair still facing her. Aria groaned, getting shakily to her feet. Weaponless, one arm completely useless, she got herself into as much of a fighting stance as she could manage.

Stealthily, Jack made his way down from the trees. Aria had thrown the beast from her back, and he watched as another tackled her from the front. He wanted to charge the pack, to distract them from Aria enough for her to do something, but he knew he had to be smart about it. From where he was he could see their packs sitting next to the tent, along with both of the rifles. The human knew he had little use for Aria's rifle; it might have been useful as an anti-vehicle rifle in a human's hands, but in a stand-up fight he wouldn't have any chance of wielding it. If he could just get to the rifle Aria had taken from him, though...He wasn't as good of a shot with a long gun as he was with a pistol but he figured he could hit the animals from close range with automatic fire.

Jack moved carefully. Aria had killed the animal mounted on her chest, but there were still two around her and four on the far side of the tent from him. Hunched low to the ground, he crept up, watching his feet and being careful not to step on any twigs or clumps of leaves. He was watching the nearby predators closely, but they seemed not to have heard him. As he looked, two of the animals left the tent at the same time, heading for Aria. With only two still guarding the camp, it was now or never. Abandoning stealth, Jack flat-out ran the remaining ten meters to the tent, throwing himself at his gun. He wrapped his fingers around the grip and tried to pick it up, cursing as he realized it was still clipped to Aria's pack.

One of the creatures turned its head, baring its fangs and snarling as it saw Jack with his hand on a weapon. His eyes widening in terror, Jack fumbled for the clip, his fingers finding the correct position and unfastening it. Barking, the animal whipped around and lunged at him. With barely a second to spare Jack brought the rifle up, ripping off a three-round burst right into the predator's chest. The rounds were smaller than most pistol bullets, but the high-powered projectiles were designed to tumble and fragment when they contacted flesh. The beast collapsed dead on the ground as a massive exit wound exploded out of its back.

Jumping in surprise, the other animal nearest to Jack almost managed to turn around before he

dispatched it in a similar fashion. The smoke clearing from the gunfire, Jack looked up from the corpses to survey the area. Aria had somehow managed to kill another beast, but there were still three left.

“Aria!” Jack yelled, standing up and raising his snugging the rifle in tight to his shoulder.

The Ailian wiped blood from her face, looking around for the source of the voice that had called her name. She seemed very disoriented to Jack, and was wobbling on her feet. One of the beasts looked towards Jack, but whether it had not seen how he'd killed both its packmates or it just didn't care, it turned its attention back to Aria.

“J-Jack?” Aria called back. She took a step in his direction as she seemed to see him. “What you...!”

Jack watched in horror as one animal whipped its tails, and Aria jerked forward as a tail blade slashed at her left leg, stabbing clear through it. Screaming, Aria stumbled to the ground, landing flat on her face, blood gushing forth from the fresh wound.

“Damn...,” Jack hissed. He dropped to one knee and flipped the rifle to automatic fire. Aiming carefully, he directed a long burst towards the demon that had its blade through the Ailian's leg. Four rounds rippled along its body, and it jerked its tails away from Aria as it shuddered and collapsed on the ground. The two remaining predators turned towards Jack, forgetting Aria in light of this new threat. Jack stared them down, trying to keep his breathing under control as they stared back. They seemed to be considering their options, shuffling their feet on the ground.

Apparently reaching a decision, both of them turned tails and ran off, disappearing into the night.

After making sure they were gone, Jack slung the rifle over his shoulder and ran towards the fallen Ailian. “Aria!” He knelt next to her, rolling her over. The Ailian was very heavy, no surprise for a nine-meter-tall being of trim muscle. He looked her over. Aria's eyes were closed, and her breathing was rapid and shallow. He lightly slapped the side of her face, but got no response. “Dammit...” Jack looked around, trying to think. Aria was wounded terribly, and he had no doubt that she would die if he didn't act quickly.

He leaned down, hooking his arms underneath her armpits, wrapping around her chest. Standing up, he started to drag her back closer to the fire, into the light. The fire was beginning to die, and the first thing Jack did was to throw wood onto it. Aria was shivering and he knew he needed to keep her warm. He rushed over to the tent, weaving around the dead animals, and retrieved the medical kit and one of their canteens. Returning to Aria's side, he contemplated how best to start his work.

There was nothing for it. “Sorry about this, Aria,” Jack said. He removed her belt, then started

unzipping her flight suit. "If you make it through this, you can kill me later." With some difficulty, Jack got her undressed. He gazed at the expanse of light orange fur on her body, her underbelly cream-coated. Her fur was matted all over with blood.

Jack opened the canteen and quickly washed as much of the blood off of Aria as he could. The wounds on her leg and her shoulder were the worst, and were still bleeding heavily. Jack frowned. Even with the amount of blood she had lost, he couldn't imagine that she would be in the state she was in. Aria was too tough for that. Jack touched the wound on her leg, bringing his hand up to look at it in the firelight. Apart from the Ailian's blood, a blackish, thin liquid clung to his skin.

Immediately, Jack felt his finger start to tingle with numbness. Biting back a curse, he grabbed the canteen and furiously scrubbed his hand off. The numbness started to subside, and Jack had his answer. Obviously the species that had attacked them possessed some sort of toxin. He searched in the medical kit, and after several frantic seconds he withdrew a large syringe with a capped needle. Inside was a powerful wide-spectrum antitoxin designed to adapt and fight a large number of venoms with a wide range of characteristics. Jack knew it probably wouldn't cure a toxin that the designers hadn't known to exist, but maybe it would bolster Aria's immune system enough to give her a fighting chance. He uncapped the needle and jabbed it into her arm, depressing the plunger and injecting it into her bloodstream.

With that done, Jack pulled out the wound sealer Aria had used before and got to work closing up the worst of the injuries on her body. Before long the bleeding was cut off, and Jack bandaged up the wounds. He definitely wasn't as good at this as Aria was, but he did the best he could. When he was finished with that, he surveyed his work. Aria looked like hell, but at least she wasn't covered in open wounds anymore. He watched her, reassuring himself that she was still breathing. Fast and shallow, but yes, still breathing.

Jack got himself to his feet and retrieved an emergency blanket from his pack. He covered Aria and then picked up her flight suit, which he carried down to the river to rinse off. No sense in her having to wear bloodstained clothing when she was fit again.

Slowly, painfully, Aria's eyes drifted open. Her head was throbbing, and her entire body still felt a slight burning sensation. Soft, early daylight hit her eyes, and she blinked. Even that felt difficult to her. The Ailian tried to lift her head, but she found that she couldn't, so she settled for turning it to one side. To her right she saw Jack, stretched out on his bedroll a short distance away from her, his rifle cradled in his arms as he slept.

He come back for me..., she thought. After watching him sleep for a few moments, she turned

her head to the left, and saw an empty campsite and a fire which was nothing but a few tiny flames and a pile of embers. Aria saw no animal bodies, but she did see drag marks and patches of ground where dirt had been brushed over the pools of blood. Groaning softly, she again tried to lift her head, and only managed a few inches before she had to give up.

It took a few moments before she realized she was naked underneath the blanket laying over her body. She managed to lift her left hand, and she brought it under the blanket to feel down her body. Her fingers felt bandages and tender spots where she'd been wounded, but she felt no fresh blood.

He do this...

“Awake, I see.”

Aria turned her head back to Jack. He was sitting up, looking at her. Aria tried to speak, but her throat was dry and all she could manage was a small growl. Jack smiled a little.

“I figured you'd probably be weak, what with the way you were wounded last night,” Jack said. “I thought about taking the opportunity to sleep in the tent, but I figured you wouldn't be able to defend yourself if any of those animals came back. I think they learned their lesson, though.” Jack shuffled over to her. “Hungry?”

Swallowing her pride, Aria nodded fractionally. Jack got up and went over to their packs, getting some food and bringing it over. He set a can next to Aria, and then he put the last of their gathered firewood on the fire. After a little poking and jostling the flames sprung back up. He looked at Aria.

“Can you feed yourself, or do I need to do it for you?” Jack asked her, grinning widely.

That was the last straw. Hissing between her teeth, Aria mustered all of her strength and lifted her head. She got herself not quite into a sitting position, but she was able to prop herself up on one elbow. The Ailian opened up her food and began to eat, ravenous from blood loss and exhaustion. Jack ate as well, even bringing her a second helping after she wolfed down the first. When breakfast was done, Aria laid back down, weary from even that little bit of activity.

“How are you feeling?” Jack asked, taking a seat next to her. “You took a beating last night. I thought you might not make it for a little while, there.”

“Feel weak...,” Aria murmured. “Tired. Still not feel legs...But will recover, I think...”

“Good,” Jack said, nodding.

Aria looked away from him, her head a jumble of confusion and disjointed thoughts. Then she looked back at him, her eyes blazing. “You come back. Why?”

Jack scratched the back of his head. “I figured you needed the help,” he said. “And...Well, I mean...You saved my life before. I couldn't very well just up and abandon you, could I? Besides, this

makes us even, doesn't it?"

Looking away again, Aria looked into the fire. "Thank you..."

"Ah...You're welcome..." Jack said, blinking. He hadn't expected to ever hear those words directed to him from her. "Oh, I almost forgot." He reached underneath his bedroll and pulled out her flight suit. Aria looked at it, surprised. It was clean, or as clean as could be done on short notice, and the holes done by the predators had been mended. "That sealer is really more suited for flesh, but it did okay on your clothes. I figured you wouldn't want to walk around naked the rest of the time we were here."

Aria was a little touched, despite her best efforts not to be. "Um...Thank you...Is nice gesture, yes?" Jack smiled at her. Aria closed her eyes again, trying to sort out her thoughts. She still felt lightheaded. That probably wouldn't pass until she had more rest and a few more good meals in her.

"So, are we friendly enough for me to know more about you?" Jack asked her. "You wouldn't tell me anything about yourself the last time I asked. How about now?"

"Ask."

"Seriously? You're not going to threaten to kill me if I talk too much?"

Aria growled at him, but her snarl managed to twist itself into a kind of half smile. "Could change mind. But feeling grateful just now. Ask."

"Alright, then." Jack laid down on the ground next to her, his feet up next to her head and his head down by her thighs. "I told you about my family, so how about yours? Where are you from?"

Brushing a hand over her face, Aria couldn't quite believe she was entertaining this human's curiosity. "Born on Lirna. Is Ascendancy homeworld, yes? Family live there still. Father, six sisters, two brothers."

"Big family."

"All Ailian families big," Aria said. She sighed. "Mother dead. She die three years ago. In battle. Father very sad, try to keep me home when I join military. I not let him."

Jack nodded his head. "Are you the oldest of your siblings?"

"Yes. Sisters and brothers too young for military yet. Still live at home, help father with business. He is...not know human word. Deals in food, yes?"

"A grocer."

Aria shrugged. "If that is word."

"You have a boyfriend? Or are you married, or anything?"

Those words Aria did not recognize. "What is...boyfriend? Marriage?"

"Uh...Like your father and mother, I guess," Jack said, feeling a little awkward. He really didn't

why he'd asked that question, actually. He supposed he was just curious about her, since she hadn't ever told him anything about herself before.

"Oh! No...Not mated right now." Aria was quiet for a few moments. "And you? I not ask before."

"No," Jack said, shaking his head. "I used to have a girlfriend, but she left me a few years ago. She said I wasn't serious enough about life to be worth staying with." He chuckled ruefully. "I guess she was right. I've been something of a screw-up. I quit the military, probably the only job I was ever any good at. And since then, all I've done is scrape by hauling freight. And I can't even do that right, or I wouldn't be here right now. Kind of makes me pretty useless, huh?"

Aria didn't respond to that. They were both quiet, sitting there. Though it was getting lighter, it would still be another hour or so until the sun rose over the horizon. The fire was beginning to die again, and Jack knew the campsite would get cold fast if the flames went out. He started to stand, and felt something on his arm. Looking, he saw that Aria had put a hand out, laying it on him. She was looking at him with something that...almost looked like concern.

"I'm just going to go gather some more firewood," Jack said, feeling strangely as though he needed to reassure her.

"You coming back, yes?" the Ailian asked.

"I'll be back," Jack promised. He stood, picking up his rifle and slinging it over his shoulder.

"I'm not leaving you again."

Aria let her arm drop, and she looked up at the sky. "Careful," she said, closing her eyes again.

"You get killed, and..."

Jack grinned. "I know," he said. "You'll kill me again."

Smiling, Aria nodded her head. "Yes."

They had to remain at that campsite for several days while Aria recovered her strength and healed from her injuries. Jack was amazed at how quickly Ailians seemed to heal. He knew that if a human had been injured to the extent that Aria had been, it would be at least a month before they were up and about again, but Aria managed to struggle to her feet on the second day. She couldn't do much more than be a presence at the campsite while Jack took care of all the chores that needed to be done, but it was more than he had expected of her.

Aria seemed to have warmed up to him, as well. The only times that she ever threatened him was when she was clearly joking, and she told him more about herself as the time passed, even telling him stories about her childhood and growing up on Linna. Jack told her stories about growing up on

Earth in return. When night began to fall, Aria would go to sleep in the tent and Jack would sleep on the ground outside, as he had grown accustomed to.

On the fourth night, they were setting up for bed as usual, and while Jack was unrolling his bedroll he shivered as a cold breeze blew through the campsite. He paused, huddling his arms around him to ward off the chill. Even the campfire wasn't enough to protect him from a cold breeze. Aria noticed him shiver, and watched him carefully from the entrance to the tent.

"You sleep outside again?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jack said. He stopped shivering, the breeze past. "I've kinda gotten used to it, you know? It's not so bad, being out in the fresh air."

Aria nodded. "Is cold, though, yes?"

Jack waved a hand. "Eh...I sleep next to the fire and I do okay. Every now and then the wind blows, but it's not bad."

Aria nodded again. She started to go inside the tent, but then she stopped. "Would be nicer somewhere warmer?" Her tail twitched a little, her ears flicking as she waited for his answer.

"I guess so..." Jack said, wondering what she was on about.

Looking towards the river, the Ailian was silent for a moment. Then she looked back at Jack, beckoning him with one hand. "Come. Tent big enough for two. Is warmer than sleeping outside."

Not sure he had heard her correctly, Jack tilted his head to one side, his eyebrows raised. "Share the tent with you? Really? I thought you didn't trust me."

Aria beckoned him again. "You save my life. I trust you enough to share tent. Come."

Still quite surprised, Jack stared blankly as she withdrew into the tent. Then, deciding not to look a gift horse in the mouth, he picked up his bedroll and followed her in. She was quite right, the tent was spacious enough for two, even if one of them was a ten-foot-tall tigress. Jack set his bedroll down alongside her own, then glanced over at Aria. She was stripping off her flight suit, down to her bare fur, except for the bandages. Jack felt his face warming. She did have a very...lithe...figure, and even if it wasn't a human one it was close enough to make him feel awkward.

"Aria, what are you doing?"

She turned to look at him, and he looked away from her exposed chest. "Get ready to sleep. Why?"

"Do you have to be naked while we're sharing the tent?"

"I always sleep like this," Aria said. She pulled her flight suit further down her body, drawing it down her legs and then folding it neatly. "Is normal, yes?"

"I usually sleep with at least *some* clothes on," Jack said, glancing over at her.

Aria stared at him, then chuckled. "Humans strange," she said simply, lying down. She turned her back to Jack, her tail curling around her body.

His face still red, Jack finished laying out his bedroll. He laid himself down, trying not to think about the naked Ailian barely a foot away from him. This endeavor was made all the more difficult when he felt Aria scoot herself to the rear so that their backs were touching. "Um..."

"Is warmer this way, yes?"

Jack closed his eyes. "Yeah." He tried not to focus on where his thoughts were currently leading him, but it was very, very hard.

"Jack?"

"Yes?" Jack replied, gritting his teeth as he imagined all the possible things that could come out of her mouth next, none of them very conducive to restfulness.

"Sleep well."

He let out a breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "You too, Aria."

Aria felt well enough the next day that she felt she was ready to start walking again. They packed up camp and were ready to leave before the sun was very high in the sky. As they finished up, Jack couldn't keep from yawning, his mouth going wide. Aria noticed this.

"Not sleep well?"

Jack shook his head, yawning a second time. "I...uh...I didn't. I...er...had a few things on my mind." His cheeks reddened slightly.

Aria blinked, looking at him, then shrugged. "Oh well...You sleep better after day of walking." She picked up his rifle, making as if to clip it to her pack where she'd been carrying it since they started their journey. Then she paused, looked at Jack, and held it out to him. "Here."

"Are you sure?" Jack was surprised. "You trust me enough to give me my weapon back?"

The Ailian nodded earnestly. "You save my life, and I not wake up dead this morning. Good enough for trust, I think." She pulled his pistol from her belt and gave that to him as well. "Besides. You prove you good enough to use them. Not a baby." She grinned.

Grinning back, Jack reloaded his pistol before replacing it safely in its holster on his own belt. "Thank you for that vote of confidence, Aria." He checked his rifle, making sure it was properly loaded as well. "So...Which way from here?"

"Hm...Let me see..." Aria touched her hand to her chin, her pointy ears turning this way and that as she looked around. Slowly she pointed, her arm directed along the path of the river. "That way, I think. Sun is good guide, yes?"

“True enough.” Jack tightened the straps on his pack. “Shall we be off, then?”

“Yes. Should be easy from here.” Aria pointed off into the distance. A line of mountains was just barely visible through the light morning fog. “If we have to cross those, will be harder. But hope not.”

“Right. Well then. Let's get moving.”

Jack started walking along beside the river. Aria was close behind. In a much better mood, Jack started to whistle. Hopefully, the worst was behind them.