

-Transmission Lost-
Chapter Six: Without a Paddle
by Havoc

“Jack!” Aria gasped, running along the river bank. She could still see him, though his blue pattern fatigues blended well in the gray rock and white, frothy water of the river. The water was carrying him at almost a faster pace than she could run. Her feet dodged rocks sticking up from the ground as she glanced down at her feet every now and then, lest she fall into the river as well. The human still hadn't come up above the surface of the water, and she thought he might have hit his head on a rock. Putting on as much speed as she could manage, she raced ahead of Jack's tumbling body.

In seconds, Aria was at the edge of the mesa, looking back and watching as he was carried towards her by the river. Her body was chilled by the spray coming up from the waterfall as it tumbled over the cliff. As she watched Jack come closer and closer, she looked around wildly, trying to figure something out. Her eyes landed on a long, thin vine that had fallen on the bank. Making a quick decision, Aria snatched it up and looped one end of it to create a sort of lasso. She knew she only had one chance at this, and the churning surface of the water made it extremely difficult to see.

“*Cha'kre...*,” she hissed between clenched teeth, her eyes narrowed. The Ailian could just barely see her companion, flowing ever closer to her. Lifting the vine and whirling it over her head, she hurled the looped end out into the water. The vine went taut in her hands and was nearly jerked from her grip, but she held on, digging her heels into the ground.

“*A're!*” Aria shouted in triumph. She started pulling the vine in, working one hand over the other as she worked to drag Jack to the water's edge. Every second she was inching closer to the lip of the mesa with the force of the water on the end of the makeshift rope, but she could feel she was making headway. With one last straining pull, she felt a jolt and a sudden slackness on the rope, and she fell backwards as it jerked out of the water.

Her eyes widened as she saw that the looped end had been caught around the stock and grip of his rifle, attached to which was the ripped end of the sling that had been fixed around Jack's shoulders. Scrambling to her feet, alarm gripped her once again. Abandoning the vine, she ran to the edge of the cliff, looking over. Dizziness washed over her body as she gazed down at the tremendous distance, a thousand meters at least. There was no sign of him.

“Jack!” Aria called, cupping her hands around her muzzle. Her voice echoed, but the only answer to her call was the distant crashing sound of the waterfall hitting the river far down below. Feeling sick, she leaned back, sliding a few feet back from the edge on her rear. “Oh gods...”

For a minute or so she just sat there shaking, her mind racing. There was little chance that Jack could have survived a fall like that. And along with him was half of their supplies, including most of the food. Aria thought that she might be close enough to her crash site that she could survive without him, but...

“*Sala!*” she shouted at herself. No, no, she had to get down there and find him, even if it was just to confirm his death with a body. She owed him at least that much. Standing up, Aria grabbed Jack's rifle and strapped it to her pack. Turning away from the river, she started off down the amber-grassed slope, running as fast as she believed she could manage without tripping and killing herself.

Jack felt something poking him in the face. Whatever it was, it was rounded on the end and it was fuzzy. He tried to lift his left hand to brush it away, but for some reason he couldn't move it. Jack felt groggy and was certain that he'd been dreaming just a minute ago. Shifting to one side and raising his right hand, he brushed at his face.

“Aria, your tail...,” he mumbled. He swatted at the offending fuzzy thing, but a moment later it started poking his face again. “Aria...Damn it, your tail...Wake up!”

Jack opened his eyes, and found himself face to face with a large dog-like creature. The blue-furred beast was gazing at him with five large green eyes arranged in a pentagon on its head, four nostrils flaring as it sniffed at him. It had been prodding at his face with one paw. Jack slowly raised his head, and the animal jumped back from him, spooked. Shying back several more steps, it turned and ran off into the distance.

Groaning, Jack turned his head to one side. He was lying on gravel at the edge of a gently flowing river, the lower half of his body resting in the water while his upper body was on dry land. There wasn't a single square inch of his body that didn't feel sore, and his chest felt heavy. He coughed, and a spray of water came out. A few more hard coughs seemed to clear out his lungs. As he sat up, Jack had a huge jolt of pain shoot up his left side. He looked at his left arm.

“Oh, yeah...yeah...That's not supposed to do that...”

Jack's left arm was twisted at the shoulder in a direction that was decidedly unnatural. He reached over and probed at it experimentally. Each time his finger prodded his shoulder, searing pain radiated out from the area. Jack didn't have to be a doctor to recognize that his shoulder was dislocated. There was also a nasty gash on his arm that would need some attention, but first thing was first.

Scooting himself back from the water, Jack got himself into a sitting position with his knees up in front of him. Gingerly he lifted his left arm with his right, putting his left hand in between his knees and pressing them together, anchoring his hand in place. Squeezing his knees together as tight as he

could, he took a few deep and slow breaths. Then he abruptly twisted his body to the left as hard as possible. A loud pop sounded, accompanied by a pain that made Jack feel as though he'd been shot right in the shoulder.

“Ah, *fuck!*” he screamed, falling over on his side, his right hand shooting over to clutch his shoulder. He lay there panting and trying to keep from sobbing in agony. When he was finally able to sit up again his shoulder was back in its proper position. He tested it out, rotating his arm this way and that and flexing his fingers. Every motion hurt like hell, but his muscles seemed to be working the way they should. “Okay...Now that cut...”

Jack unbuttoned his fatigue jacket and shrugged it off, wincing as the cloth dragged on the gash in his arm. He pulled his undershirt off. Gripping the white cloth in his teeth, he tore off a long, wide strip and tied it around his upper arm as best he could. The makeshift bandage wasn't very tight, but it slowed the bleeding down enough that he thought he'd be okay. Jack put his fatigue jacket back on, rolling the sleeves up to his shoulders so the cloth wouldn't bother his wound.

Now that his immediate needs were taken care of, Jack took a minute to look around and examine his surroundings. Half a kilometer to his left he saw the waterfall that he must have gone over. Jack shivered as he saw how tall it was. Hard to believe that he could have survived a fall like that, but here he was, alive if not completely well. All around him was rocky terrain with a few groves of shrubs and ferns here and there, and birds were flying around in the air.

Suddenly thirstier than he'd ever been in his life, Jack knelt by the river and scooped up some water in his hands, taking a few drinks. He sat back, wiping his mouth. For the first time since he woke up, he wondered where Aria was. The last he'd seen of her, he'd been looking at her from the river, his eyes clouded by water as she ran along the bank. Then everything was a haze. He remembered going over the waterfall and then he must have blacked out.

“I gotta find her...,” Jack said.

He was not going to last very long all on his own. His rifle was gone, he had no idea where his backpack had vanished to, and everything that he had on him was completely waterlogged. That included his sidearm. Jack removed it from the holster, and water dripped from the barrel. Grimacing, Jack ejected the magazine and field stripped the weapon. Without a proper cleaning kit there wasn't a lot he could do, but he blew on all of the parts until they were reasonably dry, and then he laid them in the sun so they could dry a little more. All of the spare magazines were damp, but Jack didn't think that would be a problem. Cased rounds were waterproof, for all practical purposes, and they would probably be alright. Still, he unloaded all the magazines and let most of the water drip out of them. There was no sense in making the risk of corrosion any greater than it already was.

While he waited for his gun to dry in the sun, Jack considered his options. He still knew the basic direction in which he needed to travel if he was going to find Aria's crash site. One thing he could do would be to start walking as normal, and hope for the best. Jack was a decent shot with his pistol, so he'd have protection as well as a way to kill food. The other thing he could do would be to stay where he was, and hope that Aria would come find him. He was reasonably sure that she'd try to find him, but he didn't want to rely on that possibility. If he started walking in the direction they'd been traveling, Jack thought it was likely that eventually their paths would cross.

"Damn, I'm in trouble...", Jack sighed. He laid back on the riverbank, looking up into the sun until his eyes hurt. He'd need more than a little luck if he was going to get out of this one. If he could find his backpack he'd be in a lot better shape...

Yeah, he thought. I'm really gonna need those supplies. Before I do anything else, I need to find my pack...

Aria took a few moments to catch her breath. After almost two hours of off and on running, she'd gotten to what felt like the bottom of the long slope. The terrain had been rougher than it had initially looked to her, hidden underneath the cover of long amber-colored grass and weeds. The ground cover was quite tall here, coming up almost to Aria's chest. At this point she had to balance her impatience to locate Jack with her need to account for safety. Anything could be hiding in the tall grass, and even her senses might miss something sneaking up on her.

Even as she said that to herself, Aria heard a soft rustle coming from behind her. Holding her breath, she hunched down low to the ground, trying to keep as quiet as she could. Her eyes flicked to the tops of the grass around her. She could see movement that was definitely not wind, and had to be made by a living being. Baring her teeth, Aria stilled the twitching of her tail, waiting for whatever it was to show itself.

Then, with a subtle flash of two very familiar-looking tails, an animal pushed through the grass right in front of Aria. As soon as it saw the Ailian, its eyes went wide. Staring it down, she widened her grin, a low growl rumbling in her throat. The demon pawed at the ground, its own mouth opening slightly as it showed off its rows of razor-sharp teeth. Flicking its tails again, it took a few steps towards her, poisoned saliva dripping from its lips.

Calmly, Aria raised her rifle, painting a red laser dot on the creature's forehead. Before it could react, she fired a single shot. The heavy round impacted just above its elongated snout, and the back of its head exploded behind it in a spray of blood, bone, and brain matter. The beast collapsed to the ground, blood pulsing from its ruined skull as it passed through its final seconds of life. The report

from her rifle shot echoed into the distance.

Cursing to herself, Aria lowered her rifle and stood up. She should have tried to kill it another, quieter way. They had already established that these animals preferred to hunt in packs. If any more of them were around, then surely they'd be attracted by the sound of the rifle shot.

"*Po'krai...*," she mumbled. Wasting no more time, she looked up at the sky. From what she could see of the sun, she got a rough idea of the direction she would need to go to get to where Jack would have fallen to. While there was no telling how far the river might have carried his body, it gave her a starting point.

Aria started moving at a fast, careful walk, doing her best not to make any more noise than was necessary. This was no time to be attracting a pack of those vile predators, and she'd already made more of a spectacle than she should have.

After a long time of searching fruitlessly, Jack decided that finding his pack wasn't going to happen. Either it had been carried away further downriver from him, or he'd lost it when he went over the falls. Whichever it was, he figured it was probably gone forever.

Jack wiped sweat from his forehead, glancing up. The sun was high in the sky, and it was starting to get very hot. With little in the way of cover, his best course of action was to start moving. Jack could see more forest in the direction he and Aria had been traveling, perhaps thirty or so kilometers distant. He thought he could probably reach there before nightfall, if he didn't stop. His only concern was water. All he had with him was a small canteen that had been attached to his belt, having a capacity of two pints. He'd filled it with fresh water in the river, but there was no doubt he'd go through that before he got to the trees. If he didn't find another source of water when he ran out, he'd be in even more trouble.

He sighed. As he'd said to himself frequently since crashing on this planet, there was nothing for it. He had as much water with him as he could carry right now, so wishing for any more wasn't productive. Jack started walking away from the river, eventually leaving the rocky terrain and making his way into the amber grassland that he'd seen from atop the mesa.

Jack had been walking for nearly an hour when he started to get that feeling he'd had before again, the feeling that he was being watched. He stopped, looking around, but the grass was almost above his head and he couldn't see much of anything other than the blades waving in a breeze. Nervous, Jack drew his pistol and continued walking. He craned his neck, looking over the amber waves. The forest ahead was closer, but still a good ways away. His anxiety was making him wish he was there already, and he quickened his pace a bit.

That was when he heard the first howl. The sound of it chilled him right to his core, and he recognized it immediately. Another pack of those creatures must be close by. Jack froze in place, not daring to make another move. His ears strained as he tried to gauge how close the animals might be to him. The second, closer, howl came a bare minute later.

Jack's courage failed him at that point. He was injured, tired, and hungry, and he broke into a run. He knew it was a mistake, but he wanted to get into cover as fast as possible. The human's footsteps made an incredible amount of noise in the sun-dried grasses. Behind him, over the sound of his running, he could hear the soft rumble of what seemed to be a massive pack.

He looked over his shoulder just in time to see one of them come crashing through the thick plant life. The shark-like snout of the animal was just as terrifying as it had been when he'd first seen one. Stopping suddenly and planting his feet, Jack turned around and raised his handgun. He fired two quick shots, missing both times in his panic-maddened state. The gunfire had the desired effect, however, of frightening the animal, and it whipped around and tore off back the way it had come.

Breathing heavily, Jack stared off in the direction it had disappeared. He willed himself to calm down, for it seemed he had a few minutes while the pack of predators reorganized itself. Taking a new strategy, Jack re-holstered his weapon and dropped to the ground. He crawled away from where he'd been standing for a few minutes, and then went still, waiting.

In the relative silence, Jack heard the demons roaming around through the grass. He resisted the rising urge to get up and run as they circled around his position, and he instead stayed completely motionless. For a long while, Jack caught glimpses of them through small gaps in the grass, their green-black fur standing out like a void against the pale golden color. He scarcely breathed, afraid that even the slightest noise would alert them to his position.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the pack seemed to wander away from his position, some heading back in the direction of the river while other began roaming around the expanse of the field. Taking the opportunity, Jack started crawling again, not yet ready to get back up. He crawled for at least thirty minutes before he felt safe enough to rise, and when he did he walked more cautiously, slowly but steadily picking his way through.

Aria finally managed to make her way to where the tall waterfall crashed down into the river. She hadn't encountered any more of those demons as she'd walked, but the Ailian still kept her sensitive ears perked up for any signs of danger, and her black nose was constantly sniffing at the air for unfamiliar scents. Admittedly, there were plenty of these kinds of smells on the uninhabited planet, but she hadn't survived years of war by letting her skills fall by the wayside.

As she got to the riverside, the misty spray of the cold water hit her face, coating her fur with tiny droplets of moisture. The sun was shining through the mist, creating a rainbow that appeared much more festive than Aria was willing to feel. She shook her head, ignoring it, and started scanning the more gently flowing lower portion of the river for any signs of Jack. The water was clear here, not foamy in the slightest, and she could see directly to the bottom of the riverbed. Immediately Aria noticed something that seemed out of place.

“Ke la...,” she murmured in dread, her eyes narrowing as she saw the dark object lying at the bottom of the river. She paced back and forth on the bank for a moment, debating what to do. She was looking at something that was decidedly not natural, but she couldn't see for sure what it was. If she wanted to know for certain she would have to swim down for a closer inspection.

Setting her pack and her rifle down on the ground, Aria sat and removed her boots, then unzipped her flight suit and stripped it off. She hadn't been swimming in quite a while, unless one counted her bath up atop the mesa, but she knew how. She stood at the edge of the flow, taking a few preparatory breaths, figuring out how best to go about this. Then, gathering her leg strength beneath her, she took a long flying leap out towards the middle of the river, diving in. The water was frigid, and Aria immediately felt her chest grow tight, but she pushed through it and kicked her legs to swim towards the bottom and the dark object she'd seen.

As she swam deeper, Aria could tell that it wasn't a body. The shape wasn't quite right. When she got to it, she realized that it was Jack's backpack. She remembered that he had been loaded down with most of their food supplies, and the heavy cans and packaged preserves had sunk the pack to the bottom. Looping her arm through one of the straps, Aria pushed off from the bottom of the river, starting to feel the pressing need for air as she swam for the surface.

Gasping for breath as her head came back up, Aria pulled the heavy pack behind her as she made for the water's edge. When she was near enough, she heaved the waterlogged backpack up onto the bank and climbed out herself. Getting down on all fours, soaked and chilled to the bone, she shook herself off, spraying the area around her. Standing back up, Aria decided not to redress, and to allow the sun to dry her off. Squatting down on riverbank, she opened up Jack's pack and started to sift through the contents.

Thank gods it not him..., Aria thought to herself. She'd slowly grown quite attached to her human companion, despite her original resolve to treat him as a prisoner of war. Finding his dead body, she now knew, would bring with it the pain of losing a friend. While she clung to a small bit of hope that no body yet found meant he might be alive, Aria knew that wasn't very likely.

“Friend...,” she whispered, speaking in human to herself. *“Is strange...”* Aria knew that thinking

of Jack as a friend was treasonous. She'd been trained to hate humans, and to see them as her mortal enemy. For the first few days she'd known Jack, she'd definitely seen him that way, and she'd certainly done her best to capture or kill him before they'd crashed on this planet. But after seeing him endure captivity, servitude, and then their cooperative survival with minimal complaint, she'd recognized many Ailian qualities in Jack. Humans, it seemed, were also capable of bravery and fighting skill. He had even saved her life...

Perhaps humans and Ailians were more like each other than either side was willing to admit. In the back of her mind, in a place she was scarcely aware of herself, Aria knew that she and Jack liked each other more than they would admit out loud. You could hardly go through experiences like they had together and not feel friendship for one another.

Most of what Aria found in Jack's backpack was salvageable. She transferred what she could to her own pack, but was still left with a lot of supplies in the other bag. After thinking about it for a bit, she decided to try to take them both. Undoubtedly it would be a burden, but since it looked as though she would have to complete her journey alone she'd rather have the supplies with her than leave them behind. Aria redressed herself and then rigged up the backpacks so she could carry both on her back, leaving both arms still free to handle her rifle. With all that taken care of, she started following the river downstream to search for Jack's body.

Aria walked for barely fifteen minutes before she noticed a large damp patch in the soil on the riverbank, further up than would be expected for normal splashing of water on the rocks. Kneeling down next to it, she examined the ground carefully with her sharp eyes. The soil was definitely disturbed, and it looked fresh. Aria looked up, sniffing the air, but could detect nothing. What she did see, however, was the faint remains of what looked like wet footprints. They looked about the right size to be Jack's. Next to the them, slightly more recent, were the paw prints of the same predators that had attacked them before.

With a surge of hope, Aria decided to follow this new trail. She couldn't imagine how Jack had survived the trip over the waterfall, but that seemed now to be just slightly more than a faint possibility.

The sun was almost set by the time Jack got near to the trees. He was again amazed by the variety of environments that this planet possessed. Instead of the wide-leafed rainforest trees that he'd seen at the start of his journey, these were towering conifer-like trees, each with thousands of long, flat needles of a dark blue color. Several meters into the forest the grass grew shorter and then disappeared, choked by the shade from the trees. While Jack was relieved to have almost made it to the shelter, he was far from in the clear. The predator pack was still in the area, and now that he was leaving the thick

cover of the grass he couldn't rely on not being found. But with the choice between being exposed to the elements and exposed to the wildlife, Jack much preferred having shelter.

Still...It'd be nice not to have to get through them to get to it...

The problem was that Jack was hunkered down in the last decent patch of tall grass after blundering his way into a group of the demon-like creatures. Thankfully, none of them seemed to have noticed him just yet, and he was currently doing his best impression of a rock as they prowled around. Jack knew it was only a matter of time before one of them stumbled upon his position, so he needed to find a way out of there and do it quick.

Jack started inching his way along the ground, his heart beating harder than ever as he listened and watched for a way out of the pack. The creatures were very intelligent, he remembered, but he'd do well not to overestimate them. They were, after all, only animals. Dangerous animals, but still only animals.

As Jack reached the edge of the grass, he realized he was running out of space, and he still hadn't found a way out. In fact, they seemed to be tightening their grouping, circling in closer. A chilling thought occurred to him: *Do they actually know I'm here?* If that was so, then Jack's situation had become a bit more pressing. They were actively stalking him, toying with him before moving in for the kill.

Well, alright, then..., Jack thought, swallowing on a dry throat. *If that's their game, I'll just have to strike first.*

Standing up quickly, Jack snatched his weapon from his holster. The grass here grew shorter than out in the middle of the field, and only came up to his shoulders. He could clearly see a ring of demons, though the sunlight was starting to fail. Directly ahead of him stood two of them, right between him and the trees. One of them looked right at him, its eyes flashing and its jaws opening in a snarl. Jack raised his weapon and lined up the tritium sights. He pressed the trigger firmly and steadily to the rear, keeping his hands as still as he could.

The first shot rang out, and Jack had the satisfaction of seeing his target crumple to the ground from a wound to its neck. He shifted aim and opened fire on the second beast in front of him, firing three quick shots, two of which struck it in its flank. The animal yelped in pain and took off running, a slight hobble to its gait as it fled. With his path cleared, Jack started running, the rest of the pack in hot pursuit as he fired back over his shoulder.

Aria's ears pricked up as she heard the shots. She was looking over the tops of the grass, and her eyes immediately picked up distant flashes in the dimming light. Her heart rate increasing, Aria

quickened her pace to a run, making for the direction of the noise and the flashes. She recognized the sound of a large-caliber handgun, and knew that there should be only one of those in existence on this planet.

Jack!

Whatever was going on, it was clear that Jack was alive, and that he was being attacked by something. Aria bared her teeth in a growl. She'd given him up for dead once, and she'd be damned if she did it again while she still drew breath.

As she ran, Aria could sense that she was not alone. She turned her head to the sides as she went, and in the darkening evening she could make out the forms of creatures pacing her. Aria roared a challenge, raising her rifle as she ran. Not even breaking pace, she let off a series of shots at the creatures that were astride her. She heard a yelp of pain as one of her shots connected, and the other demons fell back slightly. Hissing in satisfaction, Aria returned most of her attention to the path ahead, her tail whipping behind her.

Jack was almost to the trees, but he was slowing down. He thought he'd killed at least three more of his pursuers, but he couldn't be sure in the growing darkness. His weariness and dehydration was combining to make it very difficult for him to run, and several of the beasts were right on his heels. Jack tried not to think about what it would feel like for those poisonous fangs and tail blades to tear into his skin. He looked back over his shoulder as he ran, and fired one shot. The slide of his pistol locked back on an empty magazine.

"Fuck!" he yelled. He ejected the magazine and reached at his belt for a spare, but his pace slowed slightly as his attention was divided.

One of his pursuers saw the opportunity and took it. It launched itself at Jack's back, front claws extended. Jack grunted and stumbled as he felt a searing pain at his shoulders, and the spare magazine was knocked from his hands. Yelling in pain, feeling the hooked claws digging into his flesh through his jacket, the human quickly grabbed for another and slammed it home into his weapon. Reaching around with his gun hand, he jammed it into the side of the creature that was clawing at him. Before it had a chance to clamp its poison jaws on him, he fired point blank into its body. The demon went limp and released him. Ignoring the new pain, Jack fought to himself back up to speed.

Finally he made it into the trees. He dodged around the thick trunks, trying to lose his pursuers in the shadows and the thickening plant cover. He came around a particularly large tree and came to a small clearing. Spotting a depression in the ground covered by several thick shrubs, Jack dove for it, rolling inside. He barely made it before his pursuers came around the tree, and they halted, pawing at

the ground as they looked around for him. Jack held his breath, feeling blood seep from his back and soak his jacket. He could smell it, and he knew that if he could the predators soon would as well.

Well..., he thought to himself, pondering what his next move would be. *This is-*

-bad situation..., Aria thought. She was huddled under a large shrub, her empty rifle slung at her side and her knife in her hand. She didn't dare reload right now; the noise would definitely give away her position, and she had gone to too much trouble in making her mad dash for the treeline.

All around her, the pack was prowling. Aria wasn't sure how far away from her Jack was, but at the moment that hardly seemed to matter. She needed to find a way through the enemy first, and so that was what she would do.

Waiting for just the right moment, Aria readied herself to strike...