

-Transmission Lost-
Chapter Nine: Dilemma
by Havoc

Jack slowly and carefully made his way through the pirates' campsite, his senses on high alert for any sounds that would tell him that his intrusion had been detected. All he could hear was the occasional rustling of the grass as a breeze blew by, or a distantly faint chirping of some insect or another, but apart from that all was silent. He fingered the grip of his rifle nervously, his eyes darting around. The human knew he didn't have nearly as good night vision as Aria, but his eyes were gradually growing used to the pitch blackness. That was good; he wanted to use the flashlight attachment on his weapon as little as possible.

Creeping through the enemy campsite, he kept a sharp watch for a radio which he could snag and take back up the ridge he'd just descended so that he and Aria could signal for help. But whether the pirates hadn't brought one out of their ship, or they just kept them better secured than he'd hope for, he had no luck. What he did find was evidence that the pirates planned to stick around for a while. They'd set up power generators in their camp which were not easily moved, and these seemed to be trailing wires into many of their tents, possibly to power portable heaters or other modern conveniences.

Makes sense, if they're going to make this a salvage job, Jack thought to himself. They're going to want to strip everything of value from the ship, and that means staying here for at least five days or so.

What troubled Jack was that the pirates hadn't bothered to keep anyone awake on sentry duty. He wasn't sure what that meant. Maybe they weren't too concerned about the local wildlife, which made them stupid. Or perhaps they had sensors set up around the camp which would automatically raise an alarm, in which case he was already screwed. Jack figured that unlikely because if they had such sensors he probably would have been set upon by the pirates already.

After nearly forty minutes of carefully searching the pirate camp, Jack was certain that he wouldn't find a radio anywhere easily accessible. That meant that the only other places to find one would be in Aria's wrecked ship, the *Cha'la'fa*, or in the pirates' ship. Since Jack hadn't the foggiest idea of the interior layout of the *Cha'la'fa*, or how he would operate an Ailian radio if he *did* manage to find it, he decided to try looking in the pirate ship first. He'd been inside a ship of that type numerous times before and was familiar with the layout, so he'd be able to get to the radio and do what he needed to do quickly.

With that decided, Jack picked his way towards the pirates' ship. The ship was very large, easily three times as big as the ship he'd come to this planet on, the *Star's Eye*. Blocky and unattractive looking, the pirate vessel was a fairly standard military transport that had been modified with larger engines and upgraded weaponry. Basically, it was a large box with a smaller, rounded box attached on one end for the bridge area, with six large, cylindrical engine blocks on the other end. Weaponry bristled from numerous points on the exterior of the ship, and Jack was certain that there would be hidden weapons elsewhere. All in all, nothing too terribly impressive but definitely not something one would wish to face in combat if it could be avoided.

The ramp leading up to the main hatch was still down from when the pirates had begun unloading earlier in the day. Sweating profusely now, despite the rapidly cooling evening, Jack stepped up onto the ramp. He cringed at the dull clunk his heavy boot made on the studded metal, though the sound wasn't much louder than his feet on the grass had been. He climbed up, pausing every few steps to listen. Still no sound from the pirates' camp. When Jack got to the hatch, he laid his rifle against the hull next to the entrance.

"Alright...", he mumbled to himself. "Let's see here." Jack had spent three months crewing on one of these same types of transport ships during his time in the UN Navy, before being promoted up to pilot status. As such, he remembered exactly the type of lock that this ship had. Usually, to get inside this model each crew member was given a coded key card, which was waved over a small gray panel next to the hatch. Of course Jack didn't have one of these cards, so he ran his hand around the door. "Come on, I know it's here somewhere."

A second later, Jack felt a raised square edge halfway down the side of the hatch. Triumphant, he ran his finger around the raised edge. Every ship constructed for the UN Navy was required to have an override panel that could be opened up, allowing for a numbered code to be punched in. This code was required for non-crew members who would need to get in, specifically inspectors and maintenance personnel.

Jack pressed his hand down in the center of the panel, and it swung open. Inside was a lighted number pad with a few additional buttons, just as he had expected to find. Now came the tricky part: While Jack had known one of the override codes once upon a time, that had been ten years ago. The way the codes were implemented was that the code was hardwired into the ship's systems, unable to be removed except by a complete gutting and reinstall of basic components. This was essentially the same as creating a new ship, and was prohibitively expensive for all practical purposes. Jack was reasonably sure that this ship was old enough to have been the same model year as the one he'd used to crew on, and all military vessels of the same model year and type were programmed with the same override

maintenance override code. If he was right, the code Jack knew would open the door. If he was wrong, the code would lock out the manual override and probably set off the ship's alarms.

Only one way to find out, Jack said. He extended a finger to the number pad and started inputting the old code.

“Se hala na ka'vehe...,” Aria grumbled to herself, sitting back against a tree trunk near the top of the ridge. *Take too long. Hate waiting.*

Jack had already been away for an hour, and she was growing impatient. The Ailian wished that she had set a shorter deadline, but the plan had been agreed upon and Aria would stick to it. But she was still anxious, still nervous, and every five minutes she would go back to her rifle which was set up at the top of the ridge and look through the scope. Aria knew that it would be very satisfying to kill a few of the pirates from her perch, but then Jack would get in some serious trouble.

Snarling, she got up for the fifth time in the last five minutes and crawled over to her weapon. Snuggling the stock tight into her shoulder, she put her eye up to the sight and looked down at the pirate camp. Even if she had wanted to snipe some of them from where she was, she couldn't see any of them. The lack of vision wasn't the fault of her eyes; Aria could see fairly well in the dark. It was just that all of the pirates seemed to have bedded down for the night, and taking random shots into the tents would not be productive at all.

Scanning around the ground below, Aria finally spotted Jack. He was walking up the ramp to the pirate ship, which confused her. She'd expected him to go for her own ship, to try to retrieve the radio inside. Then again, perhaps the pirate ship made more sense. With all of the stuff that the pirates had removed from the wreck during the daylight hours, it was possible that her radio might not even be inside the *Cha'la'fa* any longer. If that was the case, Jack would need to get a working radio from the pirates.

That didn't make Aria feel any better about what he was doing, but at least it made sense.

“Luck to you,” she wished him quietly, taking her eye away from the scope. Her stomach was rumbling, and she wanted a snack. Aria had the sneaking suspicion that she would need her energy before the evening was over.

Crossing his fingers on one hand, Jack reached for the number pad with another. Double-checking his memory just to make sure he had it right, he slowly tapped out the six-digit sequence he'd learned during his time in the military. Each press of a button made an audible beep, and he held his breath, certain that one of the pirates would wake up and hear what he was doing. When he finished he

leaned back from the pad, waiting. A small red status light blinked above the numbers as the ship computer processed the code that he'd entered.

Just as he was thinking that the code had been wrong, and that the alarm would sound at any moment, the red light blinked off and a green one shined steady. The number pad chirped an acceptance of the code. Hardly able to believe what he was seeing, Jack pressed a button next to the manual input and the main hatch slid open with only a slight creak. Elated, he picked his rifle back up and proceeded into the ship.

The ship's interior was dim, and seemed to have mostly been shut down for the night. Things inside weren't completely dark, however, and small auxiliary lights shined along the ceiling panels, giving him enough light to see his way by. Holding his weapon in a ready position, Jack started inside the ship. This type of ship had numerous corridors inside, and would have been impossible to navigate under ordinary circumstances, but Jack remembered the floor plan from his younger days. However much the pirates had modified the ship they seemed to have kept the alterations external, limited to the weaponry and the engines. Everything else was exactly the same.

From the entrance, Jack turned right down a corridor which would eventually take him to the bridge area. That wasn't where he needed to go, however. Jack was looking for a radio, and every ship of this type had a communications station separate from the bridge which contained the integrated ship comm system as well as communications equipment which could be unhooked from the ship's systems and carried in a more portable fashion. Since that was what he was after, Jack followed the corridor for a few minutes and then detoured to the left.

The whole time, Jack moved slowly, trying to make as little noise as possible. Just because the pirates had camped outside didn't mean that there might not still be a few of them inside of the ship. He prayed that he wouldn't encounter any of them. Though he was prepared to shoot to save his own life, once he fired his weapon that would be it, and the rest of the pirates would know he was there. He had Aria up on the ridge in case things went south, but she might not realize that anything was wrong until it was too late for her to do anything, and if he was in a fight inside the pirate ship she wouldn't be able to help in any case.

Putting those thoughts aside for the moment, Jack concentrated on keeping track of where he was going. He took another left from the corridor he was walking down, then turned right into a hallway that extended a long ways across the width of the ship. Doors lined this hallway, but Jack was only concerned with the one that stood at the very end. That, if his memory was serving him well, would be the access door for the communications station. Quickening his pace a little, his heart pounding like a sledgehammer against the inside of his chest, Jack walked down the hallway until he

reached the door. Unlike the doors which led into the ship, this one had no security since it was assumed that if someone had made it this far into the ship they were probably one of the crew or another authorized person. Jack pressed the access control beside the door and it hissed open.

Jack's heart nearly stopped when he saw that someone was inside the room. A pirate was sitting at the communications array, a set of headphones over his ears. Thankfully, he had his back to the doorway. The reason he hadn't turned around at the sound of the door opening was evident right away. The pirate was bobbing his head slowly, a bottle of what looked like beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Heavy metal music was audible, muffled somewhat by the headphones being pressed against the pirate's ears, but clearly cranked up to high volume. Jack shook his head slightly, suppressing a snort of laughter. The pirate was using the communications set for his own personal music player.

Taking the chance that luck had tossed his way, he crept into the room and raised his rifle. Swinging his arms as hard as he could, Jack brought the butt of the rifle crashing down on the back of the pirate's head. With a dull crack and a low groan of pain, the man slumped in his chair and slid to the floor. Making sure the door was closed behind him, Jack dragged his unconscious form away from the chair and rested him against the far wall. Taking his place in the chair, Jack shut off the music and looked over the equipment arrayed around the room.

"Hm...," he said to himself. "Looks pretty standard. They haven't done much customization when it comes to the communications equipment." Jack quickly found one of the portable radios and detached it from its housing. He made as though to get back up and leave, but paused for a moment. He might want to do a little more investigating. Maybe it wasn't important to know a whole lot about these pirates, but then again, it might be. Jack surveyed the integrated radios, not touching any of the switches to avoid setting off any signals. Every few moments he glanced at the unconscious pirate, making sure that he was still in dreamland. So far so good.

Chewing on a piece of dried meat, Aria sat near the edge of the ridge, looking down at the silent pirate camp. Nearly two hours had passed now, and there was still no sign of Jack returning. Aria was growing even more restless, and was seriously considering going down there. She was anxious now, worried that something might have happened to Jack. He should have been back by now; the three hour time limit had been a generous estimate of how long he would have needed for a quick sneak-and-peek. About the only good news, from Aria's perspective, was that the moon had climbed in the alien sky, giving her a clearer view.

From where she was, Aria could see that nothing seemed to have changed down below. The wreck of the *Cha'la'fa* was still just as destroyed as before, and the pirate ship was still as motionless

and quiet as ever. The pirate tents were unmoving, as one would expect tents to be. Aria could see multiple power generators set up among them, and those were quiet as well. She shivered a little as a chilled wind blew through the area.

Something pinged in the back of her mind. The night was cold, just like nearly every night had been while she'd been stranded on this planet. If the pirates had power generators, they should be running to provide heat to their tents. But Aria's sharp ears couldn't detect any hint of noise from them that would suggest they were operating. That was...not right...

“Pa'ka...,” the Ailian cursed to herself, her eyes widening. *How I not realize before...* She stood up, snatching her rifle from the ground. Gripping it tightly, she began stalking down the ridge, her feet occasionally slipping on the slick grass in her haste. She hoped she wouldn't be too late.

What the hell? Jack thought to himself. He was startled by what he was seeing right now. Civilian vessels, and pirate vessels still technically counted as civilian vessels, would have their radios tuned to commercial band frequencies to get information on planetary weather, space hazards, and traffic control. Since civilian ships had different mission parameters and capabilities, they needed this specific information. However, each input receiver of this ship's integrated radio was tuned to military frequencies, both the standard ones and some not-so-standard ones that Jack didn't recognize, but which were coded with Special Operations identifiers.

“This isn't a pirate ship at all...,” Jack murmured to himself.

“Very good.”

Jack whipped around in his chair, his eyes widening and his heart ramping up to breakneck speed. Standing in the doorway, which he hadn't even heard open, were three of the “pirates”, including the female leader he'd observed before. All three of them were armed with handguns, and all three of their weapons were pointed directly at him. Jack slowly raised his hands, feeling a sense of déjà vu. A similar situation had been how he'd met Aria. Somehow Jack didn't feel as though this situation would work out quite as well.

The female looked at the male to her right, jerking her head towards the unconscious radio operator. “Taylor, take Smith to sick bay.” The male she was speaking to holstered his weapon and went to the man, picking him up under the arms and dragging him out of the room. The female leader stepped further into the room, and the other male kept an eye on Jack while she handcuffed his arms to the chair. With that done, she dragged over another chair and sat in front of Jack, crossing one leg over the other and putting her weapon away. The male stood at her shoulder, keeping him covered with his gun.

“Who are you?” Jack asked, finding his voice. “Why are you in a ship with pirate markings?”

The female smiled at him, though it was a smile with absolutely no friendliness in it. “You're in no position to be asking questions, my friend,” she said. Her accent was neutral, and Jack couldn't place it. “But I'll indulge you. We're part of a UN Special Operations commando unit called Task Force Amber. We masquerade as pirates to penetrate enemy lines and conduct reconnaissance and espionage missions.”

“Never heard of you.”

“That's the idea,” the commando said. She crossed her arms. “You can call me Captain Bennett. And you must be Mr. Squier.”

Jack looked surprised. “How...How did you know my name?”

“We didn't come here first. The first wreck we investigated was your ship, the *Star's Eye*.” Bennett uncrossed her legs, leaning forward. “We downloaded the ship's logs from what was left of the main computer, so we know everything that happened right up until you crashed. Now, how about you tell us everything that's happened since then? Like how you came to be at the crash site of the Ailian vessel that was pursuing you.”

Jack opened his mouth, then closed it. He shook his head. For some reason, he knew he shouldn't share that kind of information with these people, even though they claimed to be military. He didn't have a good feeling about them at all.

“You're not going to tell me?”

He shook his head again, tight-lipped.

Bennett sighed. “I was afraid of that. Ramsey?”

The commando standing behind Captain Bennett walked forward. With little in the way of warning he jammed the barrel of his gun against Jack's left leg and pulled the trigger, firing one round into his thigh. Jack jerked back in his chair, his arms straining against the handcuffs as he let out a bloodcurdling scream of pain. Blood streamed from the smoking wound. Bennett waved a hand and the commando holstered his weapon, then withdrew a tourniquet from a pocket and wrapped it around Jack's thigh.

Choking back the pain, Jack gasped for breath. He stared at the wound in his leg, not quite believing what had just happened. He looked up at Bennett, but she was looking at him impassively.

“How about now?” she asked. “Ready to tell me?”

“F-Fine...,” Jack managed to say, his voice almost squeaking with the effort of speaking through the pain. “I'll tell you...”

Creeping around one of the tents in the empty campsite, almost at the pirate ship, Aria froze in place as she heard the shot. From the muffled nature of the sound, she thought it had probably come from within the ship. Her heart jumped a little bit as she felt the familiar thrill of battle start to come to her. There was a fight coming, no mistake about that. But underlying that thrill of battle, for the first time, she felt a touch of fear. Jack was inside that ship, and there couldn't be any good reason for there to have been gunfire inside.

“Need to get in there...,” the Ailian hissed.

Aria quickly ran up the ramp to the main hatch. She paused there, confused. The entranceway was much different from one on an Ailian ship. The locks on Ascendancy vessels were biometrically coded, and would open when an authorized person presented a retina scan. This lock seemed to require some sort of device to open. She strapped her rifle to her back, out of the way, and knelt next to the doorway on the ramp, trying to figure it out. She messed with the controls next to the door for twenty minutes. Aria knew ways to override the biometrics, but she wasn't sure what to do with an electronic lock.

Her ear twitched suddenly. Aria wasn't even sure why it had twitched, but she paid attention to it. Over the years, she had learned to trust her instincts. Cautiously, she pressed her ear to the door of the ship and listened carefully. For long moments, she didn't think that she heard anything. Then, faintly, Aria heard the soft tapping of footsteps on the other side. They grew gradually louder as she listened, and it sounded as though there was only one person approaching the door. She flattened herself against the outside of the hull at the top of the ramp, next to the door, and drew her knife from its place on her belt.

A soft beeping sound was heard from the inside of the doorway, and the hatch slid open. A man stepped through, and Aria heard a metallic snapping sound, saw a brief flare of light, smelled the faint odor of something fragrant burning. In a flash, Aria darted her hand out and grabbed the side of the man's head. Before he had a chance to even utter a cry of surprise, she swung her knife hand over and drew the blade across his throat, opening his neck up from ear to ear. Blood splattered the metal surface of the ramp, liters of it spilling from the man's body in a matter of seconds. Letting his body fall, Aria darted inside the ship. The door closed behind her.

Aria quickly got her rifle off of her back, bringing it up to cover the inside of the ship. The scent of human blood faded from her nostrils, but the rush of adrenaline didn't fade. Her heart was racing now, and she had to force herself to focus on the task at hand. Jack was somewhere inside the ship. She didn't know the first place to look, and would have to follow her nose. She knew his scent well by now, enough to be able to pick it out from the other human scents that filled the ship. Keeping her rifle

raised, she started into the ship.

Captain Bennett leaned back, her arms crossing again. Jack, still breathing heavily with sweat beading on his upper lip, watched her and tried to figure out what she was thinking. The other male commando, Ramsey, was pacing behind him. Jack glanced over his shoulder, then back at Bennett. She was regarding him with an impassive gaze. He'd told her the whole story, hadn't left anything out at all. For damn sure, he didn't want to get shot again. One time in his life was definitely enough.

"So, that's it, then?" Bennett finally said after what seemed like an eternity.

Jack hung his head. "That's it."

"Not quite." Bennett held up a finger, rubbing her chin with her other hand. "You've left out an important part. Where's the cat now?"

Jack looked back up, clamping his mouth shut. He felt his defiance returning despite his fear of what the commando leader might do. He shook his head, refusal evident on his face. No matter what, Jack wasn't going to give up Aria like that.

Bennett smiled at him. "How about this, then? I'll make you a deal."

"A deal?" Jack narrowed his eyes, suspicious but curious.

"Yes. It's quite a good deal." The woman stood, clasping her hands behind her back. "This unit is due to head home after we're finished up here. You tell us where the Ailian is, and if we can take her alive, you get a ride home with us."

Jack's heart sank into his stomach. Of anything Bennett could have offered him, she had to offer that. It was the one thing Jack wanted more than anything: to go home. He almost couldn't bear the thought of not getting there, and to be able to ride home with these commandos, even after what they'd just put him through...Well, it was better than staying on this planet forever.

But could he trust what this woman was saying? She wanted something from him, and Jack was willing to bet that she would say anything to get it. Jack didn't believe for a minute that they were going to try to take Aria alive. They'd showed him what they were about when they tortured him to get information. He was certain that Bennett was planning on killing Aria as soon as Jack told her where to find her. And when Aria was dead and Bennett had what she wanted out of the wreck of her ship, there'd be absolutely no reason to keep Jack alive, and he'd be dead as well.

But what if Jack was wrong?

Bennett clapped her hands, jolting Jack out of his inner turmoil. "Time's up!" she snapped. "What's it gonna be, Squier?"

"I..."

Loud gunfire made all three of them look towards the door. Bennett ran for the door control, and paused with her hand over it. She looked back at Jack and the male commando. "Ramsey, keep him in here. Anybody but me comes through that door, kill him." She ripped her sidearm from its holster and slapped the door release, running out to the sound of more gunfire.

Ramsey stepped to the far side of the room and leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, looking unconcerned. Jack stared at him, unblinking, while he stared right back.

Aria, what are you doing...

Aria waved her hand, swiping away the faint smoke from her rifle shots, and stepped over the two bodies lying in the hallway. All pretense at stealth were gone now, and she was looking for more targets. She knew what path Jack had taken through the ship now, could follow the smell, and she ran. At each corner, she would pause only for a moment, making sure she could go around without being shot down. She'd been in patrol ships for a while, but she hadn't forgotten her tactics learned in military training. She also hadn't forgotten what fighting trained soldiers was like; these were no mere pirates, even *if* they were only human.

Aria was rushing down a long, straight hallway now. Doors lined either side, with one straight ahead of her. Jack's trail led right this way. She snarled, ready to advance, but behind her she heard loud, running footsteps, and shouting. Glancing over her shoulder, she skidded to a halt and turned around, one arm slapping out and opening a door beside her. Aria slipped inside, half in and half out of the doorway, lying in wait like the predator that she was.

The footsteps halted before anybody came around the corner at the end of the hall. Aria kept her aim steady, waiting. After a few moments, a head slowly edged its way into view. Aria squeezed the trigger, and the head snapped back, accompanied by a pink-and-gray cloud of blood and gore. She growled a challenge.

Another man came around the corner, swinging his arm out and bracing a rifle against the wall. He sent a one-armed burst of fire down the hall towards Aria, and bullet fragments peppered her leg as the rounds impacted the wall near her. Aria ignored the stinging pain and fired back, striking the man in the torso. As he fell to the floor a man and a woman came into view, opening up on her with their own rifles. She jerked out of the line of fire and into the open room, feeling a brush of air as a pair of rounds zipped through the space her head had occupied half a second before. Aria popped the magazine out of her weapon, grabbing and inserting a fresh one. She waited for a lull in the firing outside and then emerged again, kneeling.

Four humans were advancing down the hallway towards her, their rifles up and aimed at her.

Aria shot at them, had the satisfaction of seeing two of them crumple before their companions returned fire. There was a white-hot searing pain along her left hip as a bullet sliced against her, a glancing blow. Snarling, she rolled to the side, coming up against the opposite wall and firing again. The other two humans fell, leaving the hallway ahead of her clear. Aria slowly lowered her rifle, breathing hard, her head spinning with the battle high.

A shot rang out behind her, and Aria's body spun around as a bullet tore through the meaty part of her left shoulder. As she fell to the floor, she saw a human female dash past her. Roaring, she hauled herself to her feet, firing after the fleeing figure. The human was too fast for her, and the bullets thudded into the wall at the end of the hall as the person made it around the corner. Aria ran after her, forgetting about Jack in her rage.

The female was running towards the rear of the ship, where the engine area was. Aria didn't care if she was being led into a trap, she wanted that bitch dead. They were running through a labyrinth of passageways, taking turn after turn. Aria was losing track of where she was going, but that was fine. She could find her way back when she needed to.

A minute later Aria came around a corner into what had to be the engine room of the ship. The female she'd been chasing was standing inside, near a bank of computer controls. She had her the index of one hand pressed down hard on a button, her other hand holding a pistol pointed at Aria. Baring her fangs, Aria raised her rifle, sighting directly on the woman's head.

"Stop!" the woman yelled. Her expression was mostly neutral, but there was a touch of fear to it. Aria let the corners of her mouth turn up in a grin. She liked seeing fear in an enemy's face. It was a welcome sight to her. "I know you can understand me. If you shoot me, my hand's going to come off this button. If I release it without typing in the right command, the ignition circuits in all of the engines will fry."

Aria's fingers tightened on her rifle grip. "So what," she hissed.

The female swallowed, a bead of sweat rolling down her forehead. "If that happens, this ship will be a useless pile of metal. We'll all be stuck on this planet, no way to get off. Do you want that to happen?"

"No difference," Aria growled, advancing a step towards the female. Her aim didn't waver one millimeter. "Stuck here now anyway." Her tail twitched dangerously, showing her barely contained rage. The fur on the back of her neck was raised.

"Be reasonable," the woman pleaded. The hand in which she was holding her pistol was shaking now. "Tell you what. You let me live, and I'll give you Squier and the ship. I'll be your prisoner, just--"

Aria squeezed her trigger. The pleading woman's voice was cut off as the back of her head exploded onto the control panel behind her. For a few long seconds, her body remained standing, shaking erratically with death spasms. Then she collapsed, her pistol clattering to the floor of the engine room. Her hand came away from the button, which popped up with an audible click. There was silence for a few moments, then Aria heard a deafening crackling sound as electricity surged through the circuitry in the engine room. All of the status lights flickered, and then the room went dim as the engines went completely dead.

Aria lowered her weapon, gazing at the dead woman in front of her. "Much to learn of Ailians..."

Then she turned her back on the corpse and left, running to try to retrace her steps to where she could find Jack.

The male commando who had been left to guard Jack was pacing again, appearing impatient. The sound of gunfire had stopped, and now everything was mostly quiet. He stared at the door, paying little attention to Jack. Jack took the opportunity to test the strength of the handcuffs holding him to his chair. Like one might expect, they were solid steel and quite strong. But the commandos had been a little careless in fastening them. The cuff on his right hand had been left loose enough that he thought he might be able to wriggle his hand out of it.

Jack started working, twisting his hand while making his fist as tight and small as possible. It helped that he was sweating profusely with a combination of fear and pain, which made his skin slick against the metal. Before long, his hand was halfway through the cuff. Every time the commando glanced back at him, he'd still his movements.

A rumble shook through the ship, and the commando jumped. Jack winced, recognizing the feel and sound of a capacitor bank frying. This ship wouldn't be flying anytime soon. There went one option for leaving the planet.

"Son of a bitch...", the commando muttered. "What the fuck is going on out there..." He opened the door, glanced out, and swore. "Shit! It's like a slaughterhouse out there!" He closed the door again, stared at Jack for a minute, then crossed the room and leaned against the wall. The tapping of his foot betrayed his anxiety.

"If you're so eager to go investigate, then go do it," Jack suggested.

"Shut up," the commando said. He rested his hand on his holstered sidearm. "Captain Bennett said I had to stay in here with you. She didn't say anything about you being alive when she got back. So keep your mouth shut, if you know what's good for you."

Not having anything else to say, and kind of not wanting to end up with another bullet hole in him, Jack kept his mouth shut and continued working on getting his hand free. He almost had it out now, if he could just ease the cuff over his knuckles...He'd probably wind of scraping most of the skin off them, but still...

Jack looked up as the door suddenly slid open. His heart leapt as he saw Aria standing in the doorway, blood streaking her flight suit and her face contorted into a snarl. The commando froze in place, staring at her in shock and terror. Aria looked Jack over for a second, and she saw where he'd been shot in the leg. She turned her eyes to the commando, and her jaws gaped open as she let loose a deafening roar full of pure rage.

The commando's face went pale as all the blood drained from it, but he managed to draw his handgun from its holster as he darted over to Jack. With admirable speed, he'd wrapped his arm around Jack's shoulders and pressed the muzzle of the pistol to the side of his head. "Alright, cat, h-here's how it's gonna go down. You put the gun down, and-"

With an effort, Jack ripped his right hand out of the loose cuff and reached up, grabbing the commando's gun hand and jerking it down. In that second where the gun was pointed away from Jack's head, Aria fired her rifle. Her shot took the commando in the arm, and he dropped his pistol as his body spun away from Jack, falling to the floor.

Before the man could try to get up, Aria was on top of him, her rifle forgotten as she ripped at him with her claws. Blood splattered the walls as she tore at him, alternating rakes of her claws with brutal punches. She was in a true blood rage now, and all her prey could do was lay there as she beat and clawed him to a bloody mess. Long after the man was dead, Aria kept beating him, shrieking and howling in disjointed phrases of her own language.

"Aria!" Jack shouted, horrified at the carnage he was watching. "Aria, he's dead, stop! Aria!"

Her ears twitching back at the sound of his voice, Aria spun around and lunged at Jack, grabbing his collar. Holding his breath, Jack stared into her eyes as she stared back at him, her lips quivering as she bared her clenched teeth. She was growling at him, rage in her eyes, looking as though she didn't even recognize him. Her nostrils flared and she whipped her tail behind her.

"Aria, it's me," Jack said, his voice shaking. "You know me."

For a long time they just stared at each other, the only noise being Aria's heavy breathing and low rumbling growls. Her hands grasped his jacket tightly, stretching the material. Jack was absolutely terrified. The look in her eyes was something he'd never seen before, something he'd only ever heard about. It was the battle high, the almost narcotic effect of combat that made an Ailian fearsome in battle. The veterans who'd survived hand-to-hand fighting that Jack had talked to in the service had

described it to him with looks of pure terror on their faces, and now he knew it for himself.

“Aria, it's me,” he repeated. He raised his free hand slowly, shakily. He touched the side of her face with it, feeling the fur against his skin. The Ailian's eyes flicked to the side, then back to his face. Jack swallowed, holding her gaze. “Come back, Aria, come back...”

Aria blinked, looking confused. Then the awareness slowly came back into her eyes, and her breathing slowed, her lips closing. She sucked in a sharp breath and leaned back from him, sitting back on her haunches. She clutched her head in her hands, huddled into a ball for several long minutes before she looked up again.

“Jack?” Aria blinked again, then shook her head as though to clear it. She looked around, spotted a key glinting on the belt of the man she'd just killed. She snatched it up and quickly released Jack's other hand from the chair.

“Thanks,” Jack said, still a little wary of her. He rubbed his wrists, feeling the soreness where the handcuff had dug into his left wrist. Then his hand went to his leg, probing at his wound. He unfastened the tourniquet, relieved to see only a little blood leak out. The bleeding had mostly stopped. Taking a deep breath, Jack tried to stand up, but his leg wouldn't support his weight and he collapsed back into the chair. “Can we get out of here? I've had enough of this ship...”

“Ah...Yes...” Standing up, Aria lifted Jack from the chair easily. She started to carry him out, but he stopped her.

“Don't forget the radio.” Aria turned and saw the portable radio that Jack had detached earlier. She picked it up and Jack took it, holding it in his hands as she carried him out of the room. Picking their way around the bodies on the floor, they both went down the hallway towards the exit to the commando ship and left death behind them.