

-Transmission Lost-
Chapter Ten: The Last Night
by Havoc

“Lie back. Be still.”

Doing as she instructed, Jack laid himself down on the floor of the tent. After leaving the commando ship, he and Aria had appropriated the camp the commandos had set up outside for their own purposes. Aria had gotten several of the generators running to provide heat to the camp, and had found several tents set up with sleeping pads. They decided to use one of them as a treatment area so that Jack's wound could be tended to.

Kneeling next to Jack, Aria unfastened his pants and drew them down his legs. He winced as the fabric dragged over the bullet wound in his thigh, and some bleeding started again. After removing his boots, Aria pulled the pants completely off and examined the wound closely. The flesh around the ragged wound was blackened slightly, burned by the heat of the contact shot from the commando's pistol. She probed gently but firmly with her fingers, and Jack choked back gasps of pain as the Ailian dug a finger in. The wound was bleeding freely now, disturbed by her examinations.

“Bullet still inside,” Aria said, looking up at Jack's face. “Could try to take it out, yes? But might cause more damage. Better to leave it in.”

“I don't want a bullet in my leg,” Jack managed, the pain starting to increase as his adrenaline wore off. “Try to take it out, but...be careful about it.”

“Yes, I...oh.” Aria looked around, her eyes widening in a sudden realization. “I forget. Leave our packs up on ridge when I come down. Not have any medical supplies with us.”

Giving an exasperated sigh, Jack placed a hand over his eyes. “You have got to be kidding me. Well, what about on the commando ship? I remember Captain Bennett saying something about there being a sick bay in there. You ought to be able to get a few supplies from there.”

Nodding, Aria stood up in the high-ceilinged tent. “Yes. You give me code to enter, and I go. Will not take long.” Jack told her the code, and the Ailian left the tent. Her footsteps faded away from the tent, and Jack heard the sounds of the hatchway opening and closing a few minutes later.

Trying not to think about the pain, Jack lay there and waited for her to return. With blood slowly streaming down his leg, though not as much as right when he'd been shot, he picked up his pretty-much ruined pair of pants and pressed them hard against the wound. The pressure hurt like hell, but he managed not to pass out.

Nearly half an hour, by Jack's estimation, passed before Aria made it back to him. When she re-

entered the tent she had a full ship surgeon's kit slung over her shoulder and a bundle of clothes under one arm. Aria knelt next to him again, setting the clothing aside and shucking off the surgeon's kit. While Jack watched her, she opened the kit up and withdrew some disinfectants, numbing agents, and bandages.

“What took so long?” Jack asked her, curious. She seemed a little out of breath.

Aria shrugged her shoulder, nonchalant. “Was one more commando left, in sick bay. Had to take care of problem.” Jack shivered, though he wasn't about to admonish her for what she'd done. He would have done exactly the same thing in her position, considering what the commandos had done.

Getting to work, Aria first took a section of bandage and wetted it with some of the liquid disinfectant. Using the damp bandage, she wiped off his wound, cleaning the dried and wet blood and burned powder from around the hole. When she finished with that she picked up a filled syringe of a numbing agent.

“Is going to hurt a moment,” Aria said, somewhat apologetically. Before Jack could respond she jabbed the needle directly into his wound and depressed the plunger. Jack's body tensed up and he threw his head back, screaming between his clenched teeth as fire shot up and down his leg from the point of injection, but he kept himself still. As Aria withdrew the needle, the fire cooled down and his leg gradually went numb. “May not want to watch. Humans so timid.”

“Hey, you, listen...,” Jack started to protest, but he saw a little sparkle in her eye, and realized she was trying to lighten the situation with humor. His protest faded away into a chuckle. “Right, right. Just don't screw up the wound any more than it already is. You Ailians are only good at killing things, after all.”

Widening her thin black lips in a smile, Aria picked up a scalpel from the surgery kit and started cutting into the wound. Despite her warning, Jack watched in fascination, amazed that the numbing substance could work so well. As he saw the scalpel cutting into his flesh, he felt a slight tugging sensation but no pain at all even as fresh blood began to flow. When the wound had been opened up enough, Aria set the scalpel aside and retrieved a set of strong tweezers and a spreader. Using the spreader to keep the incision open, she went in with the tweezers and probed around for the bullet.

“*Po'krai...*,” she muttered to herself, searching around for several minutes. Just as Jack was starting to worry about when the anesthetic was going to wear off, he felt a solid tug and Aria clamped down on something. Aria pulled hard with the tweezers and yanked them out, a small, bloody lump of titanium-jacketed lead held in them.

“Man...,” Jack breathed, reaching down and taking the bullet between two fingers. He examined it closely. “It's lucky this wasn't a hollowpoint. That could have done some serious damage.”

“Yes,” Aria agreed. “You very lucky.” She snatched up another small wad of bandages to soak up the blood that had gathered in and around the wound. After cleaning it again, she sprayed a substance inside and along the incision that was designed to clot Jack's blood, and then she wrapped his thigh tightly with bandages to patch it up. Sitting back, she looked satisfied with her work, her tail waving back and forth slowly behind her. “Is good job for only an Ailian killer, yes?”

Jack smiled at her. “Yeah, you make a pretty good doctor when you put your mind to it.”

Smiling back, Aria picked up the bundle of clothing that she had set aside earlier. “Here. Fresh clothes. Look about your size, I think.”

“Thanks,” Jack said. He took the clothes from her, a full set of pants and a jacket in the same unmarked black fatigues that the commandos had been wearing. A few small patches of blood seemed to have been hastily wiped off of the clothing, and Jack looked up at Aria, arching an eyebrow. “I think I have a pretty good idea of where you got these.”

“Is not important,” Aria assured him. “Besides, person who they belong to not need them, yes?”

“Right...” Jack pulled off his old jacket and tossed it into a pile with the pants he'd been wearing. He put on the “borrowed” set of clothing. While a little bit big, they fit him well enough.

“Now, what about you?”

Aria looked a little confused. “Me?”

“Yeah,” Jack said, surprised. “You mean you can't feel that? Your shoulder and your leg?”

Her eyes widening a little, Aria looked at and felt her shoulder and her leg. She seemed shocked to feel the bullet wound in her shoulder, and the bloodied lacerations caused by the bullet fragments in her leg. She shook her head. “Ah...Is hard to explain. Something happen when we get in good fight. Not feel pain for hours afterward. Not even realize I hurt...”

“Well, lie down,” Jack said, getting up on his knees, a little wobbly. “My turn to play doctor.”

Later, Aria and Jack sat opposite one another in the other sleeping tent, having left behind the bloodstains in the first. Aria had the top portion of her flight suit unzipped and pulled down for comfort, though she had bandages wrapped around much of her torso. Jack was thankful for the lack of distraction; he had enough to concentrate on right now. They had a fairly important decision before them, or rather between them. For they each sat on one side of the radio set they'd carried out of the commando ship.

“Well...what now?” Jack asked for probably the fifth or sixth time.

Aria had learned to be patient with her human companion, though she was growing tired of his indecision. “Is simple,” she said, for probably the fifth or sixth time. “Use radio. Call for help.”

“Sure. But who do we call?”

Shrugging, Aria looked at Jack helplessly. “Is your radio. Is your choice.” She nudged it towards him with one foot. “You use it to call humans. Get rescue from your own people. Is best, I think.”

Jack blinked at her. “I can't do that,” he protested. “If I call for help, they'll probably send a military detachment, considering how close we are to Ascendancy territory. That'd put you in danger.”

Snorting a laugh, Aria shook her head. “I know how to hide. Can wait for humans to leave with you. Come back and call my people when gone.”

Rubbing his chin, Jack considered that for a moment. “So, you've given up on making me your prisoner, then? Won't that make your people rather mad with you?”

The Ailian shrugged again, her ears flattening just a little. “Have committed treason once already on this planet.” She smiled meekly, her white teeth peeking out from between her lips. “Could do it again...Different way, but...punishment is the same. Besides, you earn your freedom, yes?”

Touched though he was, Jack shook his head. “I can't let you do that. I'm not going to let you just throw your life away like that.”

“Why?”

That question threw Jack for a moment. The single word made it seem like such a simple inquiry, but it was loaded with all sorts of other implications. And she was looking at him so earnestly when she asked it, her head tilted to one side and her tail twitching to the other. Her yellow and gold-flecked eyes were fixing him with a piercing gaze. Jack cleared his throat, meeting her eyes with his own.

“Well, because...well...,” he muttered. The human struggled with what to say for several long moments. It shouldn't have been that hard, but in his mind it was complicated. *It's just difficult to say.*

“Yes?” Aria leaned forward a little.

Giving up, Jack changed direction. “Look, I don't know what, if any transmissions those commandos might have made before you killed them all. I mean, they obviously knew we were here if they set up a trap for us. For all I know they could have radioed back to their commanders already.” He rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly very nervous. While he'd meant this as a cover for what he'd been unable to say, he was surprised to discover that the fear was very real. “I'd just rather not go back to the UN if I'm going to be facing the blame for that commando team's destruction. I mean, you might have done it, but there'll be an awful lot of explaining for me to do if they're all dead and I'm alive. You see?”

Leaning back again, Aria reluctantly nodded her head. “Is make sense...” Jack thought he saw a

hint of something in her expression, was it...? “Then what you think we do?”

“I think you should call your people now,” Jack said. He pushed the radio back towards her with his foot. “We have to be rescued by someone, and it might as well be the Ascendancy.”

Aria's eyes widened. “You are sure?” She held up a hand, forestalling his immediate reply. “Think. Ascendancy comes to rescue us, you will be prisoner of war. Put in prison, most likely, or made slave. Will be interrogated, locked up, or used.”

“Don't think I haven't been considering that the whole time I've been with you,” Jack said. A sharp wind blew through the campsite, battering the walls of the heavy tent. The rumbling caused by the rippling canvas material sounded almost like thunder. “To be honest, I don't have a whole lot waiting for me back home. My job is definitely down the tubes, and I don't have a family of my own. I've never been close to my relatives, even my parents. I'm basically a screw-up back on Earth.”

“I see...”

“So I'd almost rather be a prisoner than to go back to the scrutiny and failure I'd face back home,” Jack continued. He felt pathetic even saying that, though it was definitely true. The cargo run he'd been making had basically been his last chance to pull himself out of the gutter, and he'd blown it. “So...Go ahead. Make the call.”

Aria stared at him, crossing her arms over her chest. She regarded him with a mixture of pity and new found curiosity, and something else that strangely looked like respect. Perhaps because she recognized in him the same willingness to face an undesirable outcome that she had. Nodding slowly, Aria reached down and examined the radio, finding the power switch and turning it on. She looked back up at him once more.

“You are sure?”

“I'm sure. Besides...” He offered a weak smile. “If I don't go with you, who's going to speak on your behalf at your trial?”

She blinked at him. “You do that for me?”

“Course I would,” Jack said. He found himself surprised that she would even question that. “I owe you a lot. I'd have been dead at least five times if it wasn't for you. I could at least try.”

“Not sure they let you anyway,” Aria chuckled. “But...Very well.” Fiddling with the various knobs on the contraption, Aria started tuning the radio to the proper frequency. She adjusted the signal booster to give it as much range as possible. Jack would have suggested using the radio inside the commando ship, but he was fairly certain that would be fruitless. The sound of frying electronics inside the ship upon the activation of the doomsday mechanism had sounded pretty final, and he was sure that most of the ship's systems were deactivated.

When she had the radio tuned just the way she needed it, Aria picked up the microphone and began speaking in Ailian.

Aria spent several hours trying to reach someone on the radio. While Jack had his doubts, she seemed certain that she was getting through to someone. By her reckoning, they weren't far at all from the edge of Ascendancy space, if they weren't even within it. Aria insisted that a listening post, patrol fleet, or some other sort of Ailian military presence would certainly be in range of the radio they were using. Skeptical though he was, Jack was too tired to argue the point, though Aria did agree that if they didn't get any response in a few days they would go into the *Cha'la'fa's* wreck to see if the radio in there still worked. They both agreed to leave the commandos' radio on overnight, in any case, just in the event that someone responded while they were asleep.

When they finally did settle down for the night, though, they were both in good spirits despite their weariness. The tent they occupied now was much warmer than their usual sleeping arrangements had been, owing to the heaters that the commandos had brought with them. Aria's need to disrobe completely to sleep was less a matter of what she was used to than a need to keep from overheating now, what with her coat of fur. Jack found the warmth very agreeable, as it was just as uncomfortable for him to sleep in clothing, as it might be for any human. Not having to worry about freezing for lack of clothes allowed him to rest a little freer than he had before, although he did still wear his pants. It helped that by now he was used to sharing the tent with someone who slept in the nude, so the awkwardness factor was dialed way back.

Though they didn't really need to, they lay close together just as they had been doing all along. While they were both very tired, sleep seemed to be difficult to come by tonight. They wound up just lying side by side, chatting. The surreality of having a casual conversation with someone who should have been an enemy was mostly past, but they still felt a little of it though they didn't give voice to it. Instead they talked about what had just happened.

"I have to say, it was kind of creepy the way you killed all of those commandos," Jack said to Aria. He had his hands folded behind his head and his eyes closed. He felt his heart rate start to increase as he recalled the sight of the dead bodies while Aria had carried him out of the ship. "I've seen you fight, of course, but that was something unreal...And the way you went after the guy in the room with me."

"Yes...", Aria hissed softly. "Battle rage."

"Battle rage?"

"Yes," she said again. "Is something that happens to us. If we get hurt badly, if we are in intense

fight, or if we see something that make us very, very angry. Lose control a little. See enemy, only want them dead. Nothing else.”

“I saw that,” Jack acknowledged. He opened his eyes, turning his head to look at Aria. “You beat that guy until he was unrecognizable. I wouldn't want to have to go up against you in a real fight. I'd be a goner.”

Aria rolled onto her side towards Jack, propping her head up on one arm. Her tail draped over her hip, the tip twitching unconcernedly. “You do better than you believe, I think...I see you fight before. You not trained like me, but have ability.”

“You're being too kind.” Jack laughed, then he sobered. “I thought they were going to kill me for sure. I could have dealt with that, but I knew they were going to kill you, too. I felt helpless, but I shouldn't have worried about you.”

She smiled a little. “Is alright. I like you worry about me...” She touched her hand to his arm, rubbing her furred fingers along his skin. He shivered at the light, tickling sensation. Those thoughts about what he had wanted to say before sprung to the front of his mind again, but again he hesitated in voicing them.

“They tried to make me give you up, you know,” Jack said, just to have something else to say. “That's why they shot me. They wanted to know where you were so they could get you. They finally offered me a ride home if I told them where to find you.”

Aria sat up a little more, looking at him in surprise. “They did?”

Jack nodded. “Yeah. But I wasn't about to tell them that. I couldn't have lived with myself if I betrayed a friend for my own gain.”

Sitting up fully, Aria looked away. The part of her face that Jack could see seemed to have an oddly distressed expression on it. “You...do that for me?”

“I did.” He sat up as well, reaching a hand up and laying it on her shoulder. “Aria, I told you before, I owe my life to you. If I gave you up to save my own skin, what kind of person would I be?”

As she turned her head to face him again, Jack thought he saw moisture rimming her golden eyes. Then she smiled warmly, and her eyes cleared. “I not know what to say. I glad you do that.” She put a hand to his face, stroking his chin, then she leaned her head in close and rubbed her cheek along his. “You are good friend to me.”

Jack felt a pang of guilt, remembering the time he ran and left her in a fight with wild animals. “You've been a better one to me.” He took a deep breath, holding it for a moment. “Aria, I-”

Aria made a soft shushing noise between her teeth, placing a finger against his lips to silence him. “No more talk...” Pressing a hand to his bare chest, she pushed him back gently but firmly. Jack

allowed himself to be sent backwards onto the padded floor of the tent, looking up at Aria as she hovered over him, propped up with one arm on either side of his shoulders. Gradually she lowered herself down until her breasts pressed against his chest, her muzzle nuzzling the top of his head. Jack squirmed just a little, his pants suddenly becoming uncomfortably tight as he felt her tautly muscled lower belly against his groin.

“If you're planning what I think you're planning...,” Jack whispered, scarcely able to manage anything louder, “...it's going to be a bit difficult for me. My legs aren't working so well right now.”

Aria raised her head, looking down at his face. She brushed a hand through his sandy blonde hair, her tail waving serenely behind her. “Is good. I want to do everything anyway...You lie still, and I take care of you...”

With that, Aria lowered herself to him again, then slowly slid herself down his body. Jack bit his lip as she rubbed down along him, her naked form making its way lower. As her firm, furred breasts came over his waist, her hands found the clasp of his pants. Her fingers deftly maneuvered the button out of position, and he heard the quiet rasping sound of the zipper being lowered. With difficulty, owing to the weakened state of his injured leg, he lifted his hips and allowed her to pull the garment down and off of him. His member stood up proudly once it was freed from its confines, jumping slightly in time with his heartbeat.

“*La a'lai zan'a...*,” Aria breathed, her voice husky with desire and arousal. She placed his pants to one side, then laid her hands on his thighs and settled on her belly, careful not to place too much pressure on his injury. Jack looked down at the top of her head as she lightly touched her nose to his cock. She inhaled deeply, taking in his scent, and as the smell of him flooded her nostrils she felt her head spin slightly as though she were intoxicated.

Jack took in a sharp breath as her slightly rough, feline tongue dragged its way up along his length. She curled it around him, bathing his flesh in its warm moisture. Her eyes flicked up to look at the intensely pleased, almost pained expression on his face. He looked back down at her, breathing hard. Aria flashed her sharp teeth at him briefly, and then she lowered her mouth and sucked him inside. Jack's right hand balled into a fist and struck the floor of the tent. The inside of her muzzle was incredibly hot as she engulfed his cock.

“Aria...,” he gasped.

Purring in the back of her throat, she reached a hand up and pricked her claws against his belly, quieting him. Jack moved his hand down, interlacing his fingers with hers. She began moving her mouth over him, her thin black lips squeezing firmly over his hard flesh as her tongue bathed him. Jack moaned quietly, his thumb rubbing over the soft fur on the back of her hand. He tried to resist the urge

to thrust up into her mouth, but it was very difficult. Every time her lips moved down along his cock, he felt his tip brush the back of her throat. He'd never experienced anything like it. Her muzzle made her mouth more slender than a human female's, and her teeth dragged slightly against his skin with each movement she made, imparting a subtle sting to the pleasure she was giving him. He squeezed her hand tightly, feeling as though he was going crazy.

All too quickly, much too soon for his liking, Aria lifted her mouth from him. She pushed herself up on her arms, looking at him with half-lidded eyes as she licked her lips. "Taste different from you kiss...", she growled, her voice a velvety purr. "I like it."

Jack took a second to let his breathing catch up with his racing heart. "Makes me wonder," he finally said, "if you'd taste different. From your kiss, I mean."

Her eyes widening a little, Aria considered him for a moment. Then she smiled, rising up to her knees. "Not know. You tell me." Keeping her hand planted firmly on his belly, she held him to the floor and prevented him from rising. She crawled forward on her knees, straddling his body, moving up until she hovered over his face.

Jack gazed up at her, opened to him. A pink sliver of heaven framed by creamy tan fur. Aria towered over him, her tail trailing behind her and brushing back and forth over his lower body. She stared down at him between the mounds of her breasts, and brought one of her hands down between her legs. With two of her fingers she spread her pussy wide, a small drop of moisture falling on his chin. Jack breathed in, her spicy aroma kissing his senses.

Purring loudly, Aria brought her other hand to the back of his head. "Taste," she whispered. The playful lust in her eyes clashed with the note of command in her voice. Her hand pulled on his head, guiding him up.

As heat radiated against his face, Jack put his tongue out and licked at her sex. Aria whimpered as his smooth human tongue lapped at her. She'd been curious about this since the first time, had wondered if human males even did this sort of thing. Thankfully, he showed no hesitation, diving his tongue inside of her with great eagerness. She dug her fingers through his hair, moving her hips in a slow circle as she pressed him even closer.

Jack found the taste of her scintillating, a spiced, sweet flavor that tingled along his taste buds and made him want her even more. He brought his arms around her, gripping her toned ass in both hands. His tongue wasn't as long, as flexible as hers, but he did his best for her, slipping it inside of her snug pussy. He played along the slick walls of her passage, thin rivulets of her juices flowing out of the corners of his mouth and dripping down his cheeks. Subtle movements of her muscles tugged at his tongue, coaxing him further in.

Pulling his tongue from her with great effort, Jack kissed around her pink lips. She growled at him, an obvious command to get back to what he'd been doing, but her anger turned to purrs of pleasure as he found her clit. Aria brought a hand up to her breast, cupping and squeezing herself as he suckled at her. She was grinding her pussy against his face now, her movements slightly jerky. Her tail was lashing the air behind her, slapping at his legs. Every now and then it would strike the spot where he'd been shot, but he didn't much care at the moment.

With a tortured gasp, Aria abruptly pulled his head back. She sat there for a moment, panting, her fingers still tight around her breast. Jack watched her as she caught her breath, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He rubbed his hands up along the small of her back, scratching just above the base of her tail like one might with a housecat. He was amused to see that her rump raised up a little when he did.

"Ch'e na...", Aria breathed. She slid back from his face, gliding along his body until his cock nestled against her rear. She leaned down, cupping his cheeks in her hands and nuzzling his nose with her own. Her black nose felt cold and slightly wet.

"Aria, I need to tell you something," Jack murmured. He brought his fingers to her head, toying with the fur behind her ears. He took a shaky breath. "I..."

"Don't..." Aria whispered. She pressed her lips to his, kissing him deeply. Her tongue slipped into his mouth, playing along his own. Her breath drifted against his face as she exhaled. When she leaned back, he stared into her eyes. He saw pain there, quiet despair mixed with longing. "Just let us have this..."

Aria rose up on her haunches, lifting herself to her knees. Jack's hands rested on her thighs as he felt her fingers wrap around his member. Her mouth remained slightly open as she guided him into her body, her rear lowering as he ever so slowly pushed within her. He clenched his jaw as her warm wetness enveloped him, and she mewled shrilly as their bodies connected.

For several long minutes they both rested that way, remaining motionless with Aria nestled comfortably on Jack's waist. She placed her hands on his chest with her fingers splayed out, her eyes closed as she breathed peacefully. He watched her, gently stroking her legs, taking the time to enjoy her beauty. They both took the time to enjoy the feeling of being together again.

When Aria was ready, she took control of things, in her customary way. Her claws pricked his skin as she began to move on him, her strong arms pinning him to the tent floor as she raised herself up. Jack let her have him, perfectly happy to be taken over by her. He grasped her thighs firmly, feeling the lean muscle tensing underneath his palms.

Their mating this time had none of the frenzied heat of their first time. This time it was quieter,

softer, more tender and affectionate. Aria slowly raised and lowered herself on his cock, small moans the only sounds she made. She felt just as wonderful as before to Jack, or perhaps even more so. He gritted his teeth, unspeakable pleasure spreading through his body. The Ailian atop him was the most beautiful creature he had ever laid eyes on. He tried to hold himself back, for her, but he knew neither of them would last very long after the teasing they'd given one another.

Gasping for breath, Aria dug her claws in further, the soft pricks threatening to fully pierce his flesh. Realizing she might hurt him by accident, she instead snaked her hands around his back and pulled him into a raised, sitting position. She wrapped her arms tightly around him, pressing his face into her breasts, and she hooked her legs around his waist. Touching her muzzle to the top of his head, she rocked against him, feeling the pleasure build within her. Jack groaned into her soft bosom, and Aria could tell he was very close as well. She nosed his forehead, and it fell back, letting her flick her tongue down his face and into another kiss. She gazed at the lovely blue eyes of this beautiful male, this human to whom she owed her life.

“Aria...,” Jack managed to croak out. “I can't...I mean, I'm gonna...”

“Yes...,” she hissed. “Do it...” Aria curled her tail around him, wrapping it about both of their bodies. She tightened her grip around his back. “Jack...”

Crying out in agonized bliss, Jack buried his face against her breasts. His hands went down to her rear, and he pulled her hard against him, thrusting up into her as hard and deep as he could manage. Aria's eyes widened, her body tensing up as she felt him spill himself into her, his cock jerking inside of her. She squeezed her legs about his waist, her own body losing itself to the pleasure of the moment. For what seemed like hours they clung to each other, warmth washing over the both of them, bathing them in heated passion.

When finally it ended, they slumped against one another, supporting each other in their exhausted state. Aria brushed a hand through his hair, and he rubbed his own up and down her back. As the glow faded from their minds, they sank down to the floor, entwined in each other.

And at last they slept.

The next morning was chilly and cold. Jack and Aria spent much of it in the warmth of the tent, though in a more clothed state than the night before. They never strayed very far from the radio, though Jack didn't expect much to come from that. The only sounds it had made since the night before had been faint noises of feedback and static from space interference. Still, he humored Aria. They kept their position for most of the morning, only leaving the tent to retrieve food from the stores in the commando ship.

It was while returning from the second such trip, getting provisions for lunch, that Jack was greeted at the tent by the sight of Aria poking her head out of the entrance. She looked excited.

“Come!” she shouted to him. “I get a response!”

Hardly believing what she was saying, Jack dropped the load he was carrying and ran to the tent, rushing inside. Aria was already crouched next to the radio, talking animatedly into the transmitter. Jack couldn't understand a word of it, but Aria's excitement was contagious, and he watched her eagerly. Every now and then she would pause in her talking, and a voice, somewhat garbled by interference, would respond to her in the same language. After nearly ten minutes of back-and-forth conversation, Aria replaced the transmitter on the radio set and leaned back, seeming breathless.

“Well?” Jack asked. “What did they say? Are they coming?”

Aria turned to him, a mixture of joy, fear, and sadness on her face. “They coming,” she confirmed. Jack felt a pang of terror. While he was definitely ready to get off of this unknown planet, he knew that he would be going as a prisoner. “They very close. We have few minutes before they land.”

Jack swallowed. “So...This is it, then.” He looked at the floor of the tent. His mind was a haze of uncertainty. Already he wondered if he had made the right choice, but it was a little late to reconsider now. He looked back up at Aria. “What's going to happen when they land?”

“They know I have prisoner,” Aria told him. “They will land, send out squad of soldiers to get us. Then they will take us into ship.” She glanced away from him. “I sorry, but I have to handcuff you...Make you look like prisoner...”

“You're sure they won't just kill me?”

Aria's eyes blazed, a fierce light coming into them. “I not let them do that. You not worry. I keep you safe until they separate us.”

Twenty or so minutes later they both were out of the tent, on the outskirts of the commando camp near the wreck of the *Cha'la'fa*. Aria stood next to Jack, who was on his knees in the grass. His hands were secured behind his back with a pair of handcuffs from the commandos. Aria was gazing into the sky, waiting for her peoples' ship to arrive.

“There,” she finally said, pointing up into the sky.

Jack looked up, the sun in his eyes. He squinted, unable to see what her sharper eyes were seeing. His ears perceived it before his eyes did. A low rumbling sound reverberated through the air, and Jack recognized it instantly as the sound of a powerful ship engine. About a minute later he saw a

black speck in the sky, which grew larger every second. Before long it resolved itself in a shape which was recognizable as a ship, and one which looked like a medium-sized transport to Jack.

The ship slowly descended, an angular, jagged-shaped craft not unlike what Aria's ship had once been. It cast a shadow across the pair of them, and Jack felt his heart racing fast enough that he thought he might pass out. They both watched as it settled down to the ground a short distance away, and the ground beneath them shook from the weight of the transport. The sound of the engines quieted somewhat, though they didn't die completely.

Aria put a hand on Jack's shoulder, squeezing gently. He looked up at her, then looked back to the ship. After several minutes of suspense, a hatch finally opened in the side. A ramp extended out from it, lowering to the ground.

Out of the ship emerged two tall Ailians, both black-furred and both appearing to be male. They were wearing light armor and carrying weapons identical to Aria's. They seemed to be ground soldiers rather than pilots. Spotting Aria standing next to Jack, they walked down the ramp and advanced towards them, their heads turning this way and that as if on the lookout for a trap. Behind them, two more Ailians came, one white-furred female with black stripes and a male with dusky blue fur. Those two remained at the bottom of the ramp.

"Courage," Aria whispered, barely loud enough for Jack to hear. He wasn't sure if she was speaking to him or to herself. She raised her hand in greeting to the rescue party. "*Ha'shai. Kela se na aria me'lia cha.*" She waved a hand towards Jack. "*La'a me kara na'fa'le.*"

The two black Ailians eyed her impassively, then looked to Jack. He saw the same sort of animosity in their eyes that he'd seen in Aria's when he'd first met her. One of them moved towards him, keeping his rifle trained on Jack. He tensed up as the Ailian grabbed him underneath the arm and hauled him to his feet. Aria bit her lip, but kept her silence. One of the males said something to her in Ailian, and then started walking back to the ship. Aria followed him. The other male started pushing Jack, roughly, in the same direction.

When they got to the bottom of the ramp, the male and female standing there met Aria while the two black-furred males stayed behind with Jack. The female exchanged a few words with Aria, smiling slightly, then she gestured up the ramp. Aria looked back to Jack, a helpless look in her eyes, and then she turned and began to walk up into the ship.

Jack felt breathless. For weeks now he'd been with Aria nonstop, and now they were about to be separated. She was almost up into the ship now, and he might never see her again. The two males with Jack began patting him down, searching him in preparation for taking him into the ship, he assumed. Desperate, Jack opened his mouth.

“Aria, wait!”

He saw her back stiffen, and then she slowly turned around, near the top of the ramp. She looked down at him, surprise on her face. The two Ailians who had been accompanying her walked a few paces ahead, then stopped as well when they realized Aria wasn't moving. They turned as well, puzzled.

Jack swallowed. His heart was pounding. “Aria, I need to tell you something,” he said. He felt short of breath. “If I don't say it now, I might never be able to.”

Aria's tail twitched, and she began to tremble slightly. “No, Jack...,” she whimpered, suddenly fearful. She took a step down the ramp, shaking her head from side to side. “Do not...You can't...” The female with white fur came to her side, placing a hand on her arm.

“I'm sorry, Aria,” Jack said. He lowered his eyes to the ground. “I wish I could change it, but I can't.” He raised his gaze again, looking into her eyes. “I love you.”

Clapping a hand to her mouth, Aria squeezed her eyes shut. She stood there for long moments, not moving, just standing stock still on the ship's ramp. The other female's hand tightened on her arm. She said something insistent to Aria, urging her to continue back up the ramp. Then Aria suddenly shrugged the female's hand off of her arm and ran down towards Jack. One of the males searching him turned to her, trying to block her path, but she hurled him out of the way and he fell to the ground. Aria wrapped her arms around Jack tightly.

Before he knew it her lips were pressed against his, and they kissed passionately. There were shouts of surprise and confusion around them, but neither of them paid them any mind. Jack felt wetness on his face, hot tears flowing from Aria's eyes and dripping onto his cheek. She broke the kiss, burying her face against his neck, her shoulders shaking as she cried.

“*Se le ch'aa ara*,” she sobbed. “My dear heart...”

Hands grabbed Aria then, dragging her away from Jack. The female and male who had been with her gripped her with force, hauling her towards the ship's ramp. The male produced a set of handcuffs large enough for an Ailian, and snapped them around her wrists. She stared over her shoulder at Jack as they forced her up into the ship. He struggled, trying to get away from the two Ailians with him to get to her, but they were too strong for him.

Before she disappeared into the ship, she opened her mouth to speak once more. “No regret...,” Aria said, just loud enough for him to hear.

Then one of the Ailian soldiers struck Jack on the back of the neck, and his vision faded into black.

A Word from the Author

“Thanks to all my readers for sticking with this series so long! I've had a very good time writing this tale, and I certainly hope you've all had a great time reading it. This is the longest series I've ever had the pleasure of working on, and what a pleasure it has been! To think, I've created my two favorite characters, something I thought I'd already done.

Don't fear though, this isn't the last you'll see of Jack and Aria. This is merely the end of the first part of their story. I'll take a little time off from them, and then get back to it with more enthusiasm than ever before! So stick around, and be ready for the return of Transmission Lost!”

- from Havoc