

There was a rustling sound behind her and she turned her head slowly, the cigar smoke curling up into her eyes. A lurking figure lay crouched under the shadow of the ship's wing. Two golden circles reflected back at her.

Jeena glanced at the gun, trying not to move as beads of sweat suddenly appeared on her brow. She looked back at the animal—just as it sprang. Leaping at the weapon, she grabbed it and rolled in a single fluid motion, firing blindly into the onrushing shadow. A huge weight slammed into her, knocking her down and pinning her under it. Cursing, she clawed at the animal, fighting out from under it. Her body was covered in blood as she finally pushed it off and struggled to her feet, panting hard and shaking. Holding her ribs in pain, she examined the dead animal at her feet.

The tigra looked just like the one in the holo, or would have if not for the gaping hole running through its chest. The luxurious coat was a radiant yellow, slowly turning to a snow white at its paws. It was slightly smaller than an Earth tiger but appeared more heavily muscled. The paws were different as well, being longer and thinner. Delicate she might have called them, if not for the five-inch claws at their terminus.

She knelt down and ran her hand through the fur. It was as soft as the Chimenian mink she had once felt on Tycho but up close she saw that the animal was not as healthy as it first appeared. The fur had scattered bare spots and the animal's skin was loose over its bones. It was sick, starving probably and may have explained why it was not as silent as it might have been in its attack.

Jeena kept a wary eye out for others but neither saw nor heard anything else and remembered Vicki mentioning something about them being solitary hunters. Still shaking, she picked up the burning cigar and brushed it off before sticking it back between her teeth. Taking one last look at the animal, she limped painfully back toward the tent. The recon could wait. It was time to open the liquor.