

Chapter 01//ORIGINS

<< Research Station Intrepid, Planet Sauria >>

“Good morning, Dr Adger.” The young vixen said as she passed a middle-aged badger in the hallway. The older man nodded his head and continued on his way as the teenager passed him by. She was dressing more like her older colleagues these days with her khaki slacks and comfortable shoes. She liked how the color orange complemented her fur, the teen was blue after all, so she always wore an orange blouse under the white vest she’d been given as a member of the research team. The vixen had only recently enjoyed her 18th birthday and was now experiencing the start of her adult life on the far away world of Sauria.

Located within the Lylat System, Sauria was a primitive planet, but had long been known for its many ancient structures that carbon dating revealed were some of the oldest structures in all Lylat. The tribes of Sauria, all of which were still a primitive people, believed the ruins to be built by a race of beings known as the Krazoa with many of the tribes even worshipping them as Gods.

All the studies of the ruins of Sauria pointed to the Krazoa being an extinct species of people whose only remains were the ruins themselves. Despite being made almost entirely of stone, the ruins hid within them metal construction that no primitive race could have ever built on their own, and there was evidence of there once being a power grid on the planet, but all of that was deeply hidden within planet like a secret, and the researchers on Sauria lacked the funding to go digging many miles deep into the planet, nor did they have the heart to destroy so much of the environment just to see if there was something down there.

But everyone here was going to tease those secrets out regardless of funding even if it took a lifetime.

She reached her destination, and the door slid open to reveal a large laboratory filled with the many mingling minds that had journeyed here to study the ruins in what her father believed may have been a large city at one point in time.

Intrepid Station had been brought in by starship and assembled on site so they could have a proper research facility on a primitive world that lacked all forms of modern convenience and necessity. They’d been given a sturdy series of interconnected buildings that sat on stilts with the doorways and hallways all made with tubelike walkways that offered protection from the elements but were easy to install once unloaded from a starship. The University of Corneria might not have been willing to pay for a journey to the center of the planet, but they could afford to purchase them all a little home away from home.

Their large team hailed from all across Lylat with her family having come from the very edge of the Lylat System, from a planet called Cerinia, while many of the others came from Corneria, Fachina, and even the distant Papatoon.

The vixen scanned the room and saw some ten or so of her colleagues present at their desks working or in discussion with one another. The room was full of tables and workstations each set up for a researcher’s particular needs. She spotted her mother in a heated debate over a

metallic slate they'd uncovered weeks earlier at Dig 04, and then saw her father on the other side of the room. When he noticed her, he waved her to come over. She did pass a small greeting to her mother as she made her way to her father's table where he did a lot of his studies.

"Good morning, Krystal." He told her and leaned in to embrace her, leaving a kiss on her temple that made her cringe. She was an adult now! His fur was like her own, but so cold a color it was almost gray, and belied his actual age. He wasn't even older than her mother, and her fur was as bright a blue as her own! It was not uncommon for Cerinian foxes to be a pretty shade of blue.

"Dad." She groaned, but he paid her no mind and directed her to the item he'd been studying.

"I think I might have it figured out." He told her, lifting a metal item off the table to rotate it in his hands to show it off from all angles.

She'd seen this item before after they'd uncovered it from Dig 08. It was a heavy metallic item that looked gold in appearance but was made from some other kind of metal whose identity they'd not yet determined. Whenever they scanned it with a tool that's supposed to know this sort of thing, they got nothing useful in reply. Only by manually inspecting it the old-fashioned way were they able to confirm that it was in fact made from some kind of metal.

Shaped like a garden spade, it was only about a foot long and looked like it was meant to be held in the middle with the spade on one end and a smaller spade on the opposite end. It wasn't the only intact object they'd recovered from a dig site, but it was in such good condition after they'd cleaned it that it was difficult to believe it'd been buried in the soil of Sauria for hundreds of years, maybe even thousands. It was even attractive, with the metal having grooves and trenches carved into its surface with some kind of resilient blue paint filling in the gaps that hadn't worn off with the passage of time.

"What did you figure out?" She asked him and asked if she could touch it. Gently, her father handed her the item, and she felt its weight in her hand. For something made of metal it wasn't as heavy as she'd have thought it'd be.

"Turn it over, look there." Her father instructed. "See that diamond shaped indentation?"

She nodded that she did. The indentation was in the larger end of the item, looking like an empty socket with a piece missing.

"Dr Tappa and I believe we know what's supposed to go there. Likely a battery of some kind, and Dr Tappa may have the key to that, but he's still working out the kinks." He explained.

"We're not sure yet what this device was intended to be, but I've the hunch that it's not just a paperweight. The indentation is clearly a receptacle of some sort for a diamond shaped object, and we've uncovered a few items that appear like they'd fit, but all were cracked or broken into smaller pieces. The only intact one we've found is in Dr Tappa's office."

"Will you try to turn it on? If it even turns on." She asked.

"I don't know what would happen if we tried. We will need to empty out one of the examination rooms and use a robot to remotely embed the crystal in the device and see what happens from a safe distance." He replied

Krystal rotated the object in her hand. The device was weird to hold in her delicate hands, and it didn't feel like it was even meant to be used for anything. Even though it was shaped like a spade on both ends, it wasn't concave like a shovel. It was just chubby shapes with a narrow handle in the middle. You could whack someone in the head with it maybe, but why would you make a weapon out of gold and paint it all pretty with blue?

"Well, if that doesn't work maybe you can call it an ancient dumbbell." She smiled and lifted the object up and gestured like she was lifting a weight. Her father chuckled and reached out to take the device back and she returned it to him gently.

"I'd be very disappointed if that's all this turned out to be, dear." He said before returning the item to the worktable where the rest of his tools were located. A mixture of brushes, cleaning chemicals, toothpicks, compressed air canisters, and the like littered his workspace. The tools of an archeologist weren't always high tech.

"When do you think you'll be ready to do the test?" She asked.

"That depends on Dr. Tappa! If you're bored, you can go down and bother him. He should be working if he didn't sleep in again." He replied and she leaned in to give him a peck on the cheek like he'd done to her.

"I'll go ask him when he thinks he'll be ready."

"Thank you, dear." He replied, and she pivoted on her heel and made off to the Dr's office to pester him.

"Dr Tappa!" Krystal knocked loudly on the office door. This section of the facility was one giant room that had been partitioned into several smaller rooms so individuals could have their own spaces. When there wasn't a reply, she beat on it again even harder until the door slid open with a hiss to reveal a disheveled and portly tapir in his late 50's.

"Yes!" He said gruffly before seeing the young girl standing on his doorstep.

"Oh, it's you. Yes?" He said with a sigh.

"I was just talking with dad about the metal thing he's been working on. He wants to know when you'll be ready with the diamond thing. He wants to get a room ready to test to see if it works."

The tapir grunted and turned his back to her to return to his office. His office was also his personal living quarters, and it was in a state of chaos. It was very messy with food wrappers and balled up wads of paper strewn about his workspace with an unmade cot in the corner. On the left side of the room was his living space and, on the right, he had a work bench covered in different kinds of electrical tools.

As soon as it had been revealed that the Krazoa had developed advanced technology the University had enlisted the help of several more scientists, one of which was Dr Tappa. He was an expert in modern electrical engineering with additional background in the older 'historical' methods of producing and transporting power. His research was mainly aimed at trying to understand how the Krazoa might have powered their cities and attempted to verify if there was an actual power grid somewhere inside Sauria.

She took a step inside his office, then stopped as the tapir rummaged through his desk until he turned back to her with a blue gem in his hand. He shuffled to her and beckoned her to extend her hand. She did and he dropped the gem in her palm. It was heavy and cerulean blue in color almost like her own fur. She rolled it between her fingers and thought that it looked pretty enough to be jewelry.

"I was up late trying to figure out why I keep getting different readings. It keeps producing a stronger reading, but there isn't a pattern to the growth. It just reads stronger every time I hook it up to test." He explained. She looked down at the gem and wondered if it was something safe to be holding.

"If it's a battery then doesn't that mean it might explode? Or something like that?" She asked, thinking if she should hand the gem back. He only laughed instead.

"No, I doubt that. The readings are increasing, but I'm not picking enough anything strong enough to make me worried. If your father wants to do his test then the crystal is ready, but I can't determine if the energy inside it is enough to register in the device. Assuming, of course, that our hypothesis is correct."

"So, I can just take this to dad, then?"

"Yes, now let me get back to sleep." He told her while shooing her back out of his office with his door quickly hissing shut. Standing alone outside his office she rolled the crystal across her palm and let it drop into her other hand. Staring into the gemstone it almost looked like it was shimmering deep inside, but it was too weak to tell. There'd be microscopes in the lab if she wanted to look closer. She turned and made her way back to the labs where her parents worked.

When she arrived not much had changed in the lab, but her mother and a few others were gone. Her father was still at his desk working to clean more artifacts for future study. When he saw her approaching, he noticed the small crystal in her hand and his eyes lit up.

"Oh! I take it there was good news from Dr Tappa?"

"He said there was energy in it, and that it's been growing stronger every time he checks it, but also that he doesn't know why. He doesn't think it has enough power to do anything and I don't think he knows how to give it more power if it doesn't work." She replied and handed the diamond to her father.

He took it and rotated in his own hand with a thoughtful look.

"Well, not as helpful as I'd have liked him to be. So much for being 'The Best Engineer' in all of Corneria." He replied and gently sat the diamond down on the table next to the device.

"It's still worth a shot to try." She encouraged him, and to that he smiled and agreed with her.

"Go down to the exam rooms. I think we can clear out Room 05 to run the test. Can you start that for me?"

"Am I just moving stuff to the side or taking it out of the room?"

"If it looks expensive move it to the storeroom, the rest can just be pushed aside. We'll need a clear table to set up the camera feed and the robotics for the remote test." He told her, and she said she'd get right on it and excused herself, feeling good now that she had something important to do for once.

When she found the exam room it was a mess with boxes of supplies stacked in all four corners and up against the walls. She ran her hand along the top of the exam table and caught a layer of dust on her paw before wiping it off on her pant leg. The table would do, but she needed to wipe it down first. With everything else in boxes she'd need to check each one to see what she needed to take to the storeroom. Groaning at that she'd now gotten herself into, she looked again at the many boxes she'd have to search through and realized that this was going to take a while...

<< E.B.S. Grand Gambit, In Orbit around Planet Sauria. >>

Several men in dark red uniforms were at their posts. From the window on the bridge, they had a clear view of the planet Sauria. While its many colorful landmasses were a sight to behold, they were not in orbit around the planet just so they could admire its ancient beauty.

"Our scouting party is reporting an all clear, Admiral. They're expecting minimal opposition and have notified the acquisition team to be ready to advance. They're awaiting your orders, Sir." A uniformed primate spoke up from Comms, with his hand pressed to his headset as he monitored the fleet's communications.

"Good." A large reptile standing at the front of the bridge replied. His enormous silhouette was set before the thick glass of the window where he stood to gaze down at the planet below, and at his waiting prize. With both hands clasped behind his back he did not appear on edge despite what was now at stake for him and his crew.

Eight years had passed since Venom, along with its master, had fallen. The Admiral was the last of Imperial High Command with everyone else now dead or in a prison cell on Corneria. It took nearly a decade to rebuild his fleet, its contents now a cobbled together mass of ships new and old, all acquired through hard worked and deceit.

Nearly a quarter of his army were just mercenaries that had to be hired in secret, whose mouths had to be bribed well to keep their silence. Every penny came from the war chest the Emperor had amassed and had cleverly made sure would not fall into Cornerian hands.

Had he more time he would have waited, exercised more patience, but the hourglass was running out. The Emperor, Lord Andross', war had been waged across all of Lylat and the scars of his many victories, and many defeats, were everywhere. Scales would have preferred to take

the time to build his fleet up to an even larger size, to equip it with more ships, better weapons! There were still soldiers out there loyal to the Empire, but they were in hiding or in their prison cells.

It would take too much time to find every survivor and enlist them back under the Imperial banner, and Corneria was far too close to discovering what secrets were hidden behind the beauty of this primitive world.

Admiral Rex Tyrannous Scales lifted a hand and pressed the tip of a claw to the glass. He watched as the planet slowly rotated behind his hand, and sliding out from behind his fingertip was the location he'd long sought to visit, and now he finally could. It would soon be his, this "Force Point Temple." It, and what waited there for him.

"Begin the operation." Scales commanded his men, and his communications officer began relaying his order, and the rest of the bridge sprung to action issuing commands to troops both on the ground and in orbit.

<< Research Station Intrepid, Planet Sauria >>

After moving her fourteenth box to the storeroom Krystal was regretting being so helpful and eager to see an experiment. Most of what was in the exam room was valuable, and if the crystal or the metal thing it plugged into were to explode or do anything else that was bad, then a lot of expensive things would get broken. So, it all had to move, and she was running out of space in the storeroom to put it all.

As she lifted her fifteenth box for the day there was a sudden jolt that shook the whole building, causing her to drop the box as she stumbled to catch herself on the table so to keep from falling. No sooner than the room had shook there was a loud explosion as the sound caught up with the shockwave.

Red emergency lights activated in the corners of the room and a siren began to sound from outside the building while the speaker system indoors began its robotic call for the staff to evacuate.

"Please evacuate to the nearest shelter. Please evacuate to th-" The speaker died before it could repeat itself any further, and the siren outside quickly fell silent, too.

"What's going on?" She said to herself and hurried out of the room to see the entire facility was still lit up in the red glow of the emergency lights. There was shouting in the distance with other researchers exiting their rooms and looking around in a panic.

"Has something happened?" A pelican shouted down the hall to anyone who would answer him.

"I don't know, what happened to the alarms?" Another male voice asked.

"We should go to the shelter, I think." A female voice suggested with worry.

Another shockwave hit the building; this time strong enough to knock everyone off their feet as the roar of an explosion echoed through the walls. There was screaming and shouting as Krystal picked herself up onto her hands and knees before being knocked flat again by a third shockwave that kept everyone to the floor as an explosion violently ripped through something in the distance as the sound of metal being rent asunder filled the air with the roof of the facility being peppered with what the noise of heavy objects landing on it.

She scrambled back to her feet and started to sprint down the hall, passing everyone she came across. Everyone she ran past was either curled up defensively on the floor or trying to crawl their way back up to their feet just as she had. All she could think of was where her parents were.

The relief of seeing both her parents in the same room was cut short when she saw her mother had a bloody wound over her left eye.

“Mom!” She cried out to her.

“I’m ok sweetheart, I just hit the table when I fell.” She said while pulling her daughter in for a hug. Her father was by her side and pulled them both in. Both adults were upright and in one piece, as were a few other members of the facility that were in the lab with them.

“We need to leave the building, everyone!” Her father shouted, and another man immediately started pulling at his colleagues to urge them toward the back exit of the labs.

“Those were explosions!” Her mother said to her father, and both foxes looked to each other with worry.

“Yes, we need to leave!” He replied and pulled both mother and daughter with him towards the exit. Standing in their way was an armed soldier in red combat fatigues, aiming a rifle at the other members of the research team who’d gotten to the door before them.

“Hands up! Show ‘em!” The primate snarled as everyone shot their hands up in the air. More soldiers entered the room from both doorways and started rounding everyone up.

“What is the meaning of this!” Her father shouted and was answered with the butt of a rifle clapping him on the cheek, making both mother and daughter cry out for him as he dropped to the floor. Her mother reached him first, and a reptile yanked Krystal back by the arm and cuffed her across the cheek. She staggered backwards against a nearby table.

The side of her hand brushed up against a soldering iron and instinct commanded her to grab it. She swung wide and stabbed the soldier in the arm as he stepped in to grab her. The arm she’d stabbed had been holding his rifle, forcing him to drop it as he staggered back clutching his wound.

“Grab her!” The primate from before shouted at his men with his finger aimed right at her.

A binder full of paperwork exploded into particles as a bullet whizzed past her head close enough to ruffle the fur of her cheek.

“GRAB HER! NOT SHOOT HER!” The primate shouted with her mother’s voice screaming from the floor as her father continued to lay unconscious. Krystal ducked under the table and crawled

away as the wounded soldier dropped to his knees to go for her ankles. He caught her, but she wriggled herself out of his grip and kicked, slamming her heel into his face, and sending a trail of blood spilling down his snout as her boot broke the skin.

“They are HOSTAGES!” The monkey in charge shouted again, ordering his men to round everyone up, to take them alive.

Krystal continued her crawling, passing a look back under the tables to her mother who was crying. Their eyes met.

“Baby, run!” She shouted and was quickly cuffed herself by another soldier who was descending on her parents. As Krystal continued to use the tables to avoid being grabbed, she could see in her periphery that both her parents were being dragged away towards the door.

The wounded soldier was running now, weaponless, around the tables trying to get her. She whacked her head on the next table, knocking something heavy onto the floor next to her. It was the metal device her dad had been studying.

“Come here!” The soldier was on her now, looming over her with his now bloodied hand grabbing her by the shoulder and yanking her backwards. Her hand grabbed the device and she swung it over her shoulder as she was hauled upright, and the momentum did the rest of the work. She slammed the object right where she’d kicked him, and he was sent spiraling backwards while clutching his face. He hit the corner of a worktable and fell backwards, tipping the table over and spilling its contents all across the floor.

Still clinging to the device as her only weapon, she ran for the other door, sliding under a table to avoid one soldier before popping back up on the other side to fall right back into a sprint. Back in the hallway there were more soldiers, all wearing the same outfits and body armor taking the members of the research team into custody.

“There’s another one!” A soldier down the hall shouted and pointed at her while soldiers in the lab were now chasing after her. Krystal sprinted again, narrowly dodging a surprised soldier as she rounded the nearest corner. He attempted to grab her, but she beamed him on the head with the device, sending him to the floor with blood spilling down the cheek.

Her first instinct to escape was to run towards the work shed, since they kept all their ATVs parked there for their trips to the dig sites. She found an exit out of the facility and spilled out onto the grass as she looked around. Soldiers were still pursuing her from behind, so she scrambled back to her feet and clutched the device to her chest as she ran across the grass. In the distance there was smoke and destruction and soldiers everywhere, dozens of them!

They already had a line of prisoners being filed out of buildings as everyone was being rounded up by whoever these people were!

She made it to the shed and was stopped by a soldier who’d been inspecting a parked ATV.

“Hey!” He shouted and ran to her, and she did all she knew to do, which was to lift the device up and swing it down. This time she missed, and the soldier took a step back and lifted his rifle to swing the butt of his gun at her. She tripped, helping him to miss her cheek, but only barely. Her pursuers were now exiting the facility from where she’d just come from and were now sprinting in their direction.

Someone in a white coat came up behind the soldier in front of her and swung a shovel at him. The spade of the shovel connected with the side of his head and sent him staggering to the side only for another swing of the shovel to send him sprawling out to the dirt unconscious.

“Krystal!” It was Dr Tappa, covered in dirt like he’d been crawling.

“Doctor!” She shouted back, but he grabbed her by the arm and yanked her into the shed and shoved her into the nearest ATV.

“Get in!” He shouted even as he already had her pressed into the passenger seat.

“Where are we going?” She asked and clutched the device to her. He looked at her briefly, saw what she was holding in her arms and cranked the engine as armed men began to enter the shed.

“Not here!” He said and slammed his foot on the accelerator. They sped out of the shed, nearly running over one soldier. A gunshot rang out, metal sparking as a bullet grazed the roll cage. The shooting stopped as shouting broke out over weapons fire. They weren’t the only people in vehicles, either.

Now that they were speeding away from the facility Krystal could look back behind her. Intrepid Station had been nestled into a open plot of land the construction crew had made by clear cutting. The local terrain was very rocky and covered in trees, and this location was the only suitable area to put a building of that size. She could now see a large, armored looking shuttle craft parked on the grass and what looked like dozens upon dozens of soldiers with space fighters flying overhead.

Dr Tappa didn’t let off the gas as he sped them away and into the forest paths that led towards the dig sites at the Graveyard.

“W-where are we going?” She asked, turning to him then back towards where they came. Surely, they’d come after them, wouldn’t they?

“We- We need to get out a distress signal!” he stammered and grabbed the stick and changed gears as the ATV hit new terrain. They nearly sped out of control as the wheels hit loose gravel. Behind them Krystal thought she could hear another vehicle’s engine echoing through the trees.

“We have one of those?” She asked. The doctor looked panicked.

“I can make one!” He replied and they kept going.

The dig sites were spread apart, but they were all located in what the local tribes called ‘the Graveyard.’ It was named for the statues that were found there, sticking halfway out of the dirt. Massive figures that stood on two legs with bodies shrouded in a cloak while wearing strange masks, or helmets. Those were the ‘Krazoa’, or what everyone thought them to be.

It was the site of some kind of temple, and the digs were all over its grounds. It’s where her dad would have found the weird device, she currently gripped tight to her chest.

There was loud snapping of limbs and saplings in the distance behind them, and Krystal turned to look down the narrowing trail. She couldn't see who was pursuing them, or how many there were, but she knew they were there. A rattling from the bed of the ATV caught her attention, and it was a portable communications relay, and alongside it was a toolbox and a hastily gathered box of electrical equipment. She knew what those relays were since she had to help carry one once on a trip to a new dig site. The size of a briefcase, a relay was used as a signal booster to help extend the coverage area for everyone's radios.

Was this a part of Dr Tappa's plan? She didn't know anything about technology like this, only what it was supposed to do, but Dr Tappa was an engineer. If anyone could figure out how to get a signal out there for help, then maybe the Best Engineer on Corneria could! He would have to!

"D-Dr Tappa! Where do you need to go to build a distress signal?"

Still wild eyed in his desperation to escape he hesitated in his answer.

"It'll take a couple of hours! Just need to hide somewhere, anywhere!"

She looked back ahead of them and knew where the trail would lead. The dig sites. They had equipment there, supplies, but there wasn't anywhere for them to hide that would last them long enough to get out a call for help. The soldiers would find them too quickly!

"We can't go there! They'll find us before you can build it!"

"There's nowhere else to go! The road only goes one way!"

Krystal looked ahead of them, then twisted around to look behind them. There was no sign of their pursuers, but the noise of their arrival still echoed through the trees. She hoped the narrow trail was slowing them down, then she looked back at Dr Tappa.

"You need to get off the ATV, Doctor!" She shouted at him, and he almost lost control of the vehicle when he looked at her like she was crazy.

"What!"

"They'll catch us if we go to digs! Let me drive there so they can keep chasing me!" She said, and that made the tapir pause for a moment as he struggled to focus on the trail ahead.

"You're a child, Krystal, I can't let you do that!"

"I don't know how to call for help, Doctor! You do!"

He kept his gaze ahead, but it looked like he was getting angry, until he took one hand off the wheel and started tugging at his white lab coat.

"Help me get my coat off!" He ordered her, and she put the device down on the floorboard and started to help him pull his arm out of the first sleeve, then the other, narrowly avoiding a tree in the process. "Hang my coat around the back of your seat! Make it look like I'm still in the ATV!"

She quickly wrapped the coat around the back of the seat and started buttoning up the front to hold it in place.

“I’m gonna... I’m gonna go...” He was looking for somewhere to stop.

Krystal shoved her leg against his and pressed her foot onto the brake forcing the ATV to stop.

“Go!” She shouted and started pushing at the tapir until he tumbled out of the side of the ATV. He scrambled upright, but before he left the driver’s side he pointed to the device in the floorboard.

“That! Give it to me!” He demanded and she stopped. Krystal was halfway between the passengers and driver’s seat now, but she reached down and grabbed it. The tapir yanked it from her hands and ran around to the back of the ATV. The noise of at least one other vehicle was coming at them fast from down the trail, and the doctor grabbed the toolbox and threw it deep into the tree line along with the device before stacking the box of parts on top of the relay and heaving them both up at once before staggering towards the trees.

“Go, Krystal! Hurry!” He shouted and stumbled through the trees leaving her alone on the trail. She looked ahead and swallowed, finding her mouth was now dry, and hit the accelerator. She felt herself sink into the seat as she sped off, her limited experience with driving showing itself as she struggled to stay on the trail while also maintaining the vehicle's top speed.

She couldn’t escape the fear of crashing as she narrowly missed tree after tree with every strange object and marking on the trail sending her into a panic as she had no way of knowing what would prove to be a hazard and what was nothing to fear. The ATV hit a bump and the tires left the ground, sending her out of control with the back wheels fishtailing behind her, the side of the ATV scraping against a tree before breaking free and letting her continue.

Krystal saw she was nearing the end of the trail, and the harrowing obstacles it presented to her, and when she finally emerged into the open ground that began the Graveyard, she saw she had plenty of directions to go. She chose straight and drove ahead past the rock formations that made up the Graveyard’s edge, and down the path that would take her to Dig 01. Mostly smooth terrain with rocks and ruins to all sides of her, she knew she had a straight shot for at least a few minutes.

A gunshot rang out, and metal sparked as a bullet collided with the ATV’s roll cage, breaking the piping in two and leaving the cage to rattle noisily at her side. She screamed as they shot at her again, tears forming in her eyes, another bullet hitting the ATV somewhere behind her. The fear of crashing into something faded as the fear of being shot overwhelmed her, the bravery she had before felt so foolish to her now as she was sitting alone in an ATV being shot at. A third bullet hit the ATV, blowing out a rear tire and sending the vehicle into another fit of fishtailing.

She was fast approaching one of the large Krazoan statues, its might looming over her. She tried to avoid it, but she wasn’t in control of the vehicle anymore. She tried to turned the wheel, but the back end kept swinging behind her with the ATV now spinning a donut into the soft grass and soil, before finally rolling over onto its side from the built up momentum.

Without her seatbelt fastened she could only shriek and cling to the straps with her bare hands as the ATV rolled several times before colliding with the foot of the statue. The dirt and grass she’d ripped loose from the soil began to pelt the underside of the upturned ATV.

Krystal unclipped her seatbelt, her body dropping hard on the ceiling of the broken roll cage, partially crushed now from the violent rolling and having already been weakened by the stray bullet from before. Her ears were ringing with the adrenaline rush began to wear off, leaving a tidal wave of pain in its wake.

Her pursuers were pulling up next to her as she crawled out from under the broken vehicle, rolling onto her back to see the empty gaze of the statue staring back down at her. She was hurt, she ached all over with her hands cut up from seatbelt straps digging into her hands as she'd clung to them.

"She alive?" A male voice shouted from another vehicle. A helmeted figure knelt down next to her, the silhouette of his face suddenly looming into view and obscuring the Krazoa behind him.

"For now." The ape replied. The last thing she saw was the butt of his rifle knocking her unconscious.

Chapter 02//ENGAGEMENT

<< The Great Fox, Somewhere in Space >>

A steady beeping could be heard from one of the bridge consoles, a red flickering light blinking in sync with the noise as an incoming communication beckoned an answer. Asleep in his chair was a rabbit, old as he was wise, snoozing with his boots propped up on the console and his hands crossed over his stomach.

The Great Fox had only just finished a supply run, having left Corneria the day before and now en route to nowhere in particular. The crew of the ship was eager to score their next mission, as peace time had drained their coffers of all the money they'd earned nearly a decade prior. With the end of the Lylat War the Cornerian military didn't have near as much a need for mercenaries like the Star Fox Team.

"Peppy." Fox McCloud looked up from his handheld, a thin notebook sized device that had The Great Fox's budget neatly organized into a spreadsheet for him to review. When the hare didn't answer the fox pulled a pen from his vest and threw it at the older man, who awoke with a start.

"Oh! Looks like we've got a call." He said and put his feet down before leaning over to press the button that would permit the call to go through. The bridge's speakers crackled to life as the holographic display in the center of the bridge flickered several times before finally deciding it would activate.

Appearing before both men was the upper body of an older canine with the distinctive jowls of a hound that was familiar to both men. Fox smiled nice and wide as his meal ticket appeared ahead of him with what he hoped would be their next paycheck.

"General Pepper here!" The older canine barked before clearing his throat. His posture was as stiff as it ever was in his spiffy red hat and uniform. The gold tassels on his shoulders were a nice, if gaudy, touch.

"General! What brings you all the way to this side of the system?" Fox asked as he set his handheld to the side. He was perched in the captain's chair of his ship, The Great Fox, a vessel he'd inherited from his father.

The ship had been through a lot in the years since its maiden voyage, a dark betrayal, one major war, and countless odd jobs that took them in and out of the action as their clients saw fit. Now they were mostly broke with each new job they took paying barely enough to keep the lights on. Life was tough for a mercenary with too many morals tying his hands and too little wars to fight for the military.

"Possibly grave news, Fox." The General replied, and he pulled his hands out from behind his back to reach outside the limits of the hologram to grab something, then bringing into view a handheld similar to his own.

"33 hours ago, a cargo freighter passing near the planet Sauria picked up and transferred a distress call to the Cornerian Space Authority. The message was badly scrambled, and it took the civilian ship a few hours to figure out what it was before passing it along to us. I'm afraid we

are to blame for it taking so long to contact the Star Fox Team. We didn't want to believe the contents of the message, and it took precious time for the message to move up the chain to high command here on Corneria." He explained, the subtle notes of frustration tinting the tenor of his voice.

"What's going on exactly, General?" Fox asked and leaned forward in his seat. He could see Peppy sitting at his own station on the bridge to the right side of the hologram. The hare was thumbing a button and whispering into the microphone.

"We believe there may be a situation brewing on Sauria. There was a team of civilian researchers on the planet studying some ancient... 'Krazoa' ruins, and the distress signal appears to be from them. They claim they've been attacked and captured by Imperial troops."

Fox furled his brow.

"It's been eight years, General. That's an awful long time to wait just so some hold outs can take hostages."

"We couldn't verify if the message is true, but we were able to confirm that there's been a team of civilians living on Sauria for the last two years. It's an expedition funded by the University of Corneria, and we know there's over 30 civilians on the planet. Sauria is still primitive, Fox, and we have no people of our own down there that we can rely on for this. We currently have a fleet stationed in orbit around Katina on standby, but I'd like the Star Fox Team to pay Sauria a visit instead." The General said, setting the handheld outside the edge of the hologram before crossing his hands back behind his back.

"Is this our mission, General?" Fox asked to confirm that he and the Team were about to get back into the action just like old times.

"The Star Fox Team will head to Sauria and confirm the nature of the distress signal. If the civilians are indeed in need of help, you will render them aid, and if the threat is none other than Andross' minions then you are to inform me that the Katina fleet should mobilize and head to Sauria immediately. Is that clear?" The General finished, straightening his back.

"Like crystal, General. We're on our way there now!" Fox replied and stood up from his chair at the same time the bridge door slid open to reveal a bird, blue as the sky, and a toad, green as tea.

"Pepper out!" The General said with a salute before signing off, his visage fading from view, the hologram flickering violently before shutting off.

"Well, what was that all about?" Falco Lombardi, the Team's ace of spades in the sky, asked.

"Did we get a new job, Fox?" Slippy Toad asked from Falco's side.

"We're headed to the planet Sauria. We might have ourselves some civilians to rescue from Andross." Fox replied, much to the pair's confusion.

<< The Great Fox, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Far outside Sauria's orbit The Great Fox arrived via gate transmission. The green disc of energy opened like a dilating pupil and from it emerged the enormity of the Star Fox Team's mothership. Once it passed through the gate's lens the transmission ended and the disc shrank and vanished behind The Great Fox almost as if it had never existed in the first place.

Before the ship was now an unfiltered view of Sauria, its beauty unblemished by time or strife. The Lylat War had barely scratched the surface of this section of space, and civilization thus far had little interest in the world or peoples of this primitive planet.

All four members of the Star Fox Team were seated in the cockpits of their respective Arwings, each waiting for ROB, their trusted android, to give details about what the situation was like around Sauria.

"Fox, there are multiple energy signatures sitting in orbit around Sauria, 11 o'clock from our position relative to the planet." The android told them over the radio.

"Looks like we got a party out there." Falco spoke up, being the first one to power up his fighter's engines. The rest of the Team followed suit with a flick of a switch.

"Guess we'll have to crash it, right?" Fox replied. "What do you see out there, ROB?"

There was a moment of pause as the android studied the potential battlefield.

"I estimate one Granby class and two Colby class cruisers flanked by two dozen fighters of mixed make and model." ROB answered, and Fox could only smile.

"That's it?" Slippy was the one to make a remark first.

"We should be careful not to think that's all they've got." Peppy urged the Team.

"Peppy's right. That's all we can see right now, but there's a whole planet down there that might be hiding more trouble for us. ROB keep your eyes peeled for anything new and tell the General that he was right to put that fleet in standby." Fox told the android and began his own launch procedure.

Inside the hangar, his Arwing lifted into the air with Fox gently hovering his hand over the flight stick to guide his fighter sideways and into position on the catapult. When he felt the catapult's claw mount to the underbelly of his Arwing he thumbed the ready button.

"Alright, Team, prepare for launch!" He said, thumbing the glowing red button next to the ready button. He was yanked back in his seat as the catapult violently threw his Arwing forward along the railway that ran the full length of the hangar bay. Just before his Arwing reached the end of the rails he hovered his finger over the ignition switch that would ignite his thrusters.

At the last moment, the claw detached, and all that force and momentum shot him out of the forward hangar bay and into space around Sauria. He hit the switch, and his engines fired, adding speed upon speed that propelled him safely away from the mothership. No sooner than he'd been birthed from the belly of The Great Fox the rest of his Team had joined him via the

same procedure. All four Arwings were now in formation and flying ahead of the mothership to engage the enemy before them, which so far was still invisible to the naked eye.

“The enemy is outside visual range. Contact estimated in five minutes.” The android informed them, and Fox readied his lasers, and passed his eyes across his console to do his sixth visual check of his systems. He’d already gone over every bit of his Arwing, but in the calm before the storm one last look didn’t hurt any. His Arwing was filled to the brim with fuel and had a full payload of Smart Bombs.

“We’ve got something coming!” Slippy piped up over the radio. Off in the distance several bright red lights began to grow, and shortly thereafter red beams of light lanced out at them from afar, forcing all four Arwings to take evasive maneuvers.

“They’re just letting us know where to go!” Falco cheered.

“Push forward, Team. ROB how about you give them a taste of our own firepower!” Fox said, peeling to the left as another red beam zipped past him through space.

“What are your orders, Fox?” ROB asked.

“Shoot at ‘em, ROB!” Falco shouted.

“Affirmative. Powering Main Cannon.” ROB replied, and after no more than thirty seconds had passed, and a pair of twin beams shot from the forward cannons of the Great Fox. They collided with a target in the distance, a green shield flashing bright upon impact. If that was the Granby class, then they’d have to deal with its shields.

Peppy and Slippy paired up with each other while Falco swung to Fox’s side as they made their final approach to the enemy formation. Ahead of them, light glinted off the hulls of numerous star fighters as they made their own approach. They had the Star Fox Team outnumbered, but that’s how it always went in this line of work, Fox thought.

A wave of laser fire met them, and all four Arwings spun and deflected the shots without any of them being allowed to land a hit. All four ships broke through the front line with Falco yanking back on his flight stick, pulling his craft up into a vertical U turn and putting himself right behind the enemy fighters only now trying to turn themselves back around.

Fox left him to that as he turned his attention to the Granby. Swinging wide to the formation’s right side he planned on using the Colby class ship as a shield. The Granby had two main guns mounted to its either side, and with the Colby in the way it couldn’t fire on him.

“Fox, that thing’s shields go down when it shoots!” Peppy reminded him.

“How could I forget?” He remarked, remembering this troublesome piece of hardware from the War wasn’t hard.

The Colby put up a fight, but its limited firepower wasn’t enough to counter a nimble fighter like an Arwing, and Fox peppered its hull with laser fire until all its Starboard side weapons were busted.

Crossing over its bow Fox flicked the controls and spun his Arwing to deflect laser fire from the port side of the Colby. The Granby wasn't far away, the massive ship looming ahead of him with its main gun aimed right at Fox, but also at the Colby behind him. The interior of the barrel began to glow bright green as the wellspring of energy began to bubble from the ship's reactor.

"What!" Fox panicked and twisted the stick to the left as hard as he could, nearly overcorrecting as the Granby fired its main cannon. Now almost out of control, his Arwing got a fresh coat of black paint on its wing tips as his G-Diffuser struggled to deflect the outermost edge of the cannon's laser. The Colby was hit, and as Fox regained control of his fighter, he saw the Colby going down with escape pods already spilling out of the port and stern sides of the ship. The bow had been completely eviscerated by the beam.

"They just shot their own ship trying to get me!"

"Well, that's just one less for us to deal with, Fox!" Falco replied.

"Sounds like they're desperate, be careful!" Peppy called out.

Fox dipped low and flew beneath the Granby, then hooked a left and circled back around. The other Colby was opening fire in a different direction with its target ducking and weaving through space in a way only Falco could pull off. The enemy fighters were scrambling to take them all out, but the problem with fighting a smaller force than your own is that your own troops can get in the way of each other more easily than you would think!

A trio of fighters came straight at Fox, forcing him to twist his wings vertically, zipping through the group of them, they quickly came back around for another pass just as Fox was arcing his own path around to cut it close next to the Granby. The ship's anti-air lasers weren't effective at bringing down a quick fighter like the Arwing, but as the lasers missed Fox left and right the stray blasts were more than enough to cause his three pursuers a problem, even clipping one fighter, an old model Butterfly, in the wing. The fighter drifted too close to the Granby and slammed into the green of the shield and detonated on impact.

Out of the corner of his eye Fox spotted the Colby's escape pods, like little red spheres, air jetting their way back towards the Granby like they intended to hit the shields. Fox doubted that, and immediately pulled a U turn and flew right between the remaining two fighters as they desperately tried to bring him down.

Just as Fox had thought, the Granby opened a large hole in its shields to permit the escape pods through, and Fox hit his boosters and threaded the needle between the pods and the edge of the hole's opening. Now within the tight airspace inside the ship's shields, he throttled the Arwing back to a dead stop and held steady.

Thumbing the trigger, he peppered the starboard side of the ships faster than the gunners could pivot their turrets to track him. He focused on the two small anti-air turrets, blowing each other them right off the hull before tilting the flight stick to drift the Arwing into the blind spot of the ship's weapons systems, which was right in front of the bridge.

He rotated his Arwing in place until he was looking right at the bridge of the enemy vessel. He could hardly see the bridge crew behind the ship's green tinted window, but in war it was sometimes better if you couldn't see who you were about to kill. He was about to squeeze the

trigger when the Granby's shields suddenly shut off, leaving him completely exposed with the surviving Colby firing one of its main guns right at Fox.

He spun sideways, activating his G-Diffuser, but the red beams clipped his port side wing tip and blew it clean off. Fox pressed his thumb on the secondary trigger and fired a Smart Bomb at the Granby's bridge and slammed the booster. He shot out of there right before the bomb exploded across the ship's bridge.

"What the hell's going on over there, Fox?" It was Falco on the radio.

"They're trying to be clever! Did I take it out?" He shouted in reply.

"You took out the bridge, but its guns are still shooting!" Falco shot back.

Fox decided to put distance between him and the Granby, noticing the ship's shields weren't coming back online.

"ROB, I want you to target the Granby and take it out!" Fox ordered, and the android replied in the affirmative. A half a minute later a pair of double beams lanced across space and slammed into the Granby's bow, ripping through its hull, and splitting it up the middle. Silent explosions shook the ship as the reactor went critical, blasting an even bigger hole in the ship. What was left was shrapnel and dust.

"How's everyone doing?" Fox asked over the radio.

"I'm fine! Just trying to swat some flies!" Slippy replied.

"Took a few hits to a wing, but I'm no worse for wear. These guys are suicidal, Fox!" Peppy replied.

"Trying to keep up with you, Fox!" Falco's voice came over the radio just as Fox finished a big turn to bring the enemy back into view. The last Colby was now going up in smoke as Falco punched it full of holes with his lasers, finishing it with a Smart Bomb sunk right through the damaged plating.

Several of the remaining fighters veered off their original courses and started making a beeline towards the Great Fox. With no home left to return to, perhaps they thought they could take the Great Fox as their own with the Star Fox Team out in their Arwings.

He turned himself around to face the Great Fox but remembered the other half of the mission. There were civilians on the planet, and someone needed to check out what was going on down there.

"Everyone, they're making a play at home base! Slippy, Falco, Peppy, deal with it! I'm going to go down to the planet and see what I can find out about the research team." Fox told everyone over the comms.

"Roger!" Slippy quickly replied.

"Don't stick your neck out too far, Fox." The bird replied on his own, but his Arwing was already pivoting to make his way back to the Great Fox. Peppy was already in route to home, as well.

“Fox, you don’t think they brought the civilians up into space, do you?” The rabbit asked, and Fox felt a little cold at the realization that he was now passing by the wreckage of three warships that could have housed any number of crew and civilians alike.

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Neither did I. I hope they’re down there safe, Fox.” The old man replied, and Fox nodded in agreement to himself.

“I’ll keep the radio open, keep me updated on how the cleanup is going!” Fox finished and hit his boosters to hasten his descent to the planet. When he hit the atmosphere and felt the rumble of reentry, he realized his G-Diffuser wasn’t activating on his port side, and the right side of his Arwing was taking on a lot more stress than it was designed to.

By the time he fell into normal atmosphere he knew his Arwing’s ability to fly was about as fragile as it could be without a proper refit. The only thing going well for him was that his weapons systems were fine. Lasers were all A-Okay and he’d only spent one Smart Bomb. He had four more of those.

Fox wasn’t sure where to go from here, so he brought up the planet map and keyed in the coordinates ROB had pulled from the permit the University had signed for their expedition. As soon as he had a waypoint marked on his map a red laser shot cross his Arwing, singing the paint black and making his cockpit rattle.

“Damn!” He cursed.

<< DarkIce Mines, Planet Sauria >>

There was a ringing in her ears, loud like a whistle, that slowly faded until the muffled voices of people around her began to take shape in her mind. Her vision, which had been dark and blurred was slowly rousing, too, as the ringing drifted away as she floated out of unconsciousness.

“Is she coming to?” A voice.

“Shh, let her be.” Another voice.

She felt cold as ice, and when she finally opened her eyes, the light blinded her until something blocked its path, a shadow passing over her face to send her back into a world of darkness.

“Baby, we’re with you. It’s going to be ok.” Her mother’s voice said, and she felt something squeezing at her hand. She opened her eyes again and saw the fuzzy silhouette of a woman sitting at her side, another silhouette sat at her opposite.

Krystal blinked several times with her vision clearing up more and more until she saw her mother's worried face looking back down at her. Her father was there next her, his hand lifted high, holding a metal tray over her face to obscure the overhead lights.

"How are you feeling, dear?" Her father asked her. The more she roused from her stupor the more she picked up about her surroundings. It was so cold! Everyone was here that she could remember, all packed into a small room with walls made of black glass that were smooth like water.

"Mom?" She said, discovering how weak her voice was. She turned to her father.

"Dad!" She was suddenly startled, not by anything but herself. Her memories from before rushed back to her and she snapped awake and tried to lift herself up, a sharp pain screaming in her ears and coming from her chest, her parents had to push her back down and fight with her to keep her still even as the pain echoed loudly in her ears like the ringing from before.

"Baby! Stay still, please, it's ok!" Her mother urged her, and Krystal went limp with fresh exhaustion.

She remembered leaving the facility, the crash with the ATV, her escape with Dr Tappa-

"Dr Tappa!" She started, but her father clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Shh!" He told her. Everyone in the room was watching the three of them intently.

"Does she know?" One of them mouthed the words silently, to which her father looked down to her with uncertainty.

Her father then quietly mouthed out his own words to Krystal, removing his hand from her mouth.

"Do you know where he is?" He asked her silently. She swallowed, finding her mouth had grown very dry.

"No. We split up." She mouthed back.

"I drove the ATV to the Graveyard so they would chase me instead of him. He was going to call for help." She mouthed again.

Her father looked up at her mother gravely.

"They've been interrogating us about him. We think he's the one that brought them here!" Her mother replied, starting silently, but whispering near the end. Dr Tappa brought them here? She was confused by that and didn't know what to think. It seemed like he was trying very hard to get help for everyone! He had all that equipment in the ATV, didn't he?

"Is the girl awake?" A deep voice asked from afar.

She looked and saw the doorway, a metal cage door, and a towering figure standing on the other side of it. The reptile was dressed head to toe in a puffy uniform like he was ready to play in the snow.

“She’s injured!” Her mother shouted.

“She’s only just woke up; she has a concussion and cracked ribs!” Another of the researchers spoke up.

“Good, she’s awake.” The lizard said before walking away from the door.

“Don’t let them take her!” Her mother began to sob towards her father. Krystal made to reach for her mother, but the pain shot up through her arm that started on her left side. Did she really break her ribs? The crash...

“Honey, I’m going to try. I’m going try so hard.” He tried to console her mother, but his voice was filled with despair.

“We’re going to make it hell on them if they try.” One of the male researchers spoke up from behind her mother, a pelican who always looked grumpy in the mess hall. Joining him were other men speaking up that’d they’d try.

When the reptile returned, he had four other soldiers with him. They opened the door and there was little the men could do to stop the armed men as they entered the cell and approached where Krystal was laying. Rifle butts to the head and a taser put a stop to the minor rebellion as the remaining researchers pulled their injured companions away while the rest cowered.

“Please, she’s hurt!” Her mother pleaded.

“Back away, or I’ll cuff your husband so hard you’ll be taking care of his broken ribs from now on.” The big reptile said, and her father was the first to relent, crawling around Krystal and grabbing her mother by the shoulders as she began to sob.

“Please don’t hurt her.” Her father begged them. The reptile didn’t say anything and made a sharp hand gesture at two of his men. The pair of soldiers moved around Krystal legs and head and began to lift her up. She screamed as the pain in her ribs exploded. Her mother’s wailing could be heard behind her as the soldiers carried her out the room and into a huge carven filled with scaffolding, gantries, equipment, supply crates, everything an army would need!

They brought her to a large six wheeled transport and carried her inside before laying her down onto a long bench mounted to the side of the interior. The inside of the vehicle looked like what she’d imagine a troop transport would look like, and the entire group of soldiers that had come to fetch her were piled into the back with her.

She weakly hugged her chest as the pain continued to throb in her ribs, with each moment that passed teaching her that she’d been hurt a lot more than she realized when she first crawled out from under the ATV. One of the soldiers, a dark furred jackal, dropped to his knee next to her and produced a white satchel marked with red, and pulled a thumb sized cartridge with a long rubber cap. He pulled the cap, revealing it to be a needle, and he jabbed it into her arm before squeezing the cartridge.

It stung at first, but a cool sensation began to spread through her as the pain began to subside in her ribs. The pain wasn’t gone, but she felt like she could breathe a little easier. That, plus the

fact it was warmer in the vehicle, helped a lot. She was made to ride in the vehicle for several minutes before they transferred her to a cargo shuttle.

She had no idea how long they were traveling, but it was rough on her. Even with the painkiller she was still in pain, and unsure of why they were even taking her away from the others. She didn't even have shoes on anymore, and her jacket was gone. It wasn't teen angst to say she was miserable as she laid on her back on the field stretcher they'd moved her to, still surrounded by armed soldiers.

"They're getting some action up there." One of the soldiers remarked.

"Really?" Another asked.

"Switch to channel 223." The first soldier replied. The group were distracted now, toggling the headsets in their helmets to the new channel to listen in. None of them were kind enough to say what 'action' meant in this context, but she did notice that one of the soldiers said, after minutes of listening in, that he hoped 'they get them'. Whatever that meant.

Shortly afterwards they arrived at their destination, and instead of grabbing her arms and legs they had two men lifted her onto a stretcher. This was a lot easier on her injuries as they carried her down the exit ramp of the shuttle. She saw the ship more clearly this time, seeing it was painted a rich red color with an insignia emblazoned on its side of an ape with two blades crossed beneath his portrait. She'd seen all this before on the news when she was a kid, no older than 10 at the time.

The war.

She realized they were at the Graveyard once she was free of the shuttle's shadow. There were work crews and construction equipment everywhere, and her captors were now carrying her back to where she'd crashed the ATV.

The ATV was long gone when they arrived at the stretch of land where the giant statues stood in their rows, and so was most of the dirt. Crews had been busy, digging away as much of the soil as they could with all the statues now exposed down to their ankles. They carried her down a sloped path of packed soil and into the freshly dug pit. More men were busy hauling loose material back out of the hole, which now stretched hundreds of feet.

It didn't occur to her to ask where they were taking her, as the sight of so many men working tirelessly to uncover parts of the Graveyard that her parents never dreamed they'd get to see was being exposed in just a matter of hours. She wasn't sure how long she'd been out, but it couldn't have been that long.

The engine of industry was doing its damndest to uncover something here.

"Hold." A soldier shouted as he approached the group and her stretcher. They were stopping before a large opening in the stone ruins, now uncovered. It was heavily guarded by a dozen armed men and perched above them outside of the excavation site was a massive robot. It had a tank body in place of legs and a broad red torso with a head and arms.

"We're delivering prisoner #39 for questioning, per the Admiral's order." The soldier in the lead replied, then produced a handheld from his pocket and showed it to his questioner. The guard

looked at the handheld, then at Krystal, then nodded and balled a fist and pointed his thumb behind him towards the opening in the ruins.

Her captors continued on their journey, and this time inside the ruins. She'd wandered around the Graveyard a lot, and there were bits and pieces of structures that were buildings at some point in time, but what she was seeing now was so much better preserved. As soon as they were fifty feet into the ruins the filthy dirt covered stone gave way to a section that looked destroyed, coated in black ash and soot, rock lay scattered on the ground with the largest pieces shoved to the sides of the passage and out of the way. It looked like they'd used explosives to blow their way inside. As they carried her stretcher through the new opening, she saw metal, and then even more metal.

Everyone at Intrepid Station knew that the Krazoa used stone as a veneer to cover their metallic structures, but this interior had no stone at all! It was almost perfectly preserved with every surface shimmering a white and silver hue. There were soldiers everywhere here, and many seemed to be scientists themselves with tools and equipment to study the ruins with.

Her parents would have loved to see this, but she didn't want to think about that right now, not under these circumstances.

Minutes later, she was brought to a large central room filled with dozens more soldiers and technicians. Her stretcher was placed on the ground and one of her escorts left the group to report that they'd arrived. Why did they drag her all the way here?

"Instruct the rest of the fleet to switch to Mode Red, and ready the squadrons to sortie." The deep gravel of a reptile's voice could be heard issuing orders to someone. He turned to the escort that had approached him.

"We've brought her, Admiral. She's been conscious for the last three quarters of an hour." She overheard the ape say from a distance.

"Good." Came the reply from the tall reptile, his uniform a statelier black with red trim. The lizard turned and she met his gaze. He stared her down and after a moment more she blinked. No sooner than that and the reptile was already walking towards her, hands clasped behind him as her escort returned.

"You're the one who evaded my men for more than half an hour. Very impressive for a little girl." The lizard said, looking down the bridge of his snout at her. With his rows of sharp teeth barely hidden by his lips she couldn't tell if he was upset or amused by her.

"Injured three, Admiral." A soldier next to him remarked.

"That as well, but body cameras show the third soldier to be humiliated was injured by the good Doctor. Perhaps you know where he is? We're having a frustrating time locating him." The lizard, this Admiral, asked.

Krystal set her jaws and refused to speak.

"Is she mute, Lieutenant Kanis?" The Admiral asked, and the soldier next to him shook his head.

“No, sir, she was seen speaking with the other prisoners as soon as she regained consciousness.”

“I see. Corporal, please check to make sure her vocal cords still work.” He said, glancing towards one of the men, the jackal who’d given her the painkiller, and who had helped carry her stretcher.

The jackal nodded and quickly dropped to a knee next to her and grabbed her left arm to pull it away from her chest. With a tap of two fingers, he delivered a quick blow to her ribs, and she screamed in pain before struggling back tears.

“So, you can speak, if only like an animal.” The Admiral smirked gently down at her. “Let us see if she can be made to speak words this time.”

“Where is Doctor Tappa?” He asked her.

When she didn’t say anything, he nodded to the Corporal who then tapped her hard on the ribs a second time, making her shriek. The soldiers gathered around her stood stoically, as the workers outside their little group continued about their work as she screamed in pain as a third tap was delivered to her side.

She didn’t know where he was! Krystal gasped for air as tears soaked through the fur of her cheeks.

“I don’t know!” She sobbed.

“That doesn’t help me. We did not find the artifact with you or the ATV you escaped with. He must have it. Where would he have fled to?” The Admiral asked.

What artifact? The metal thing? Was he talking about the metal thing? She remembered being in the ATV, and Dr Tappa demanded he give it to her before he ran off with his equipment... Was that something really important? If it was so important why didn’t Dr Tappa tell anyone! Didn’t her mother did say that he might have been the reason they got attacked!

She didn’t know what to do! Another nod, and the jackal tapped her ribs, and she screamed. Her voice went hoarse as the fire burning in her side pushed aside the painkillers and left her breathing in rapid shallow breaths.

“She’ll pass out at this rate, Admiral. I’m surprised she hasn’t already.” The jackal said.

“Give her a stimulant.” He replied.

“Sir?” The jackal hesitated, and it was now clear to her that the Corporal must have been a trained medic. The Admiral glared at him, and the Corporal nodded, and produced the white satchel from before and began to go through its contents until he produced a different shaped cartridge with a rubber cap like the one she’d seen him use before.

He pulled the cap, and she tried to pull her arm away, but he was stronger than her, and the needle sank into her flesh and no sooner than that and she was feeling a wave of adrenaline rush like warmth across her skin. In that moment, she felt strong enough to do a lot more than scream, and she yanked her arm out of the jackal’s grip and slammed her fist between his legs.

He shouted in pain and rolled backwards, and before she could hit him again two other soldiers descended upon her and pinned her down to the stretcher by the shoulders. The Corporal righted himself, favoring his crotch as he moved, and leaned in to ball his fist. He delivered a shallow blow to her side, and she screamed again as the pain blew through the adrenaline and she nearly lost consciousness.

Dazed and out of breath she laid there with two men holding her down as she began to whimper in pain.

“Had your colleagues even half your bravery, girl, it might not have been you I’d have to interrogate.” The Admiral remarked.

“Admiral Scales!” A man shouted from the distance.

The Admiral turned his attention fully from her, and his gaze was now on a group of technicians working in the middle of the room. She couldn’t see what they were doing, but there were easily a dozen people working there, and as she’d been carried in, she remembered seeing a lot of chest high metal pedestals surrounding where the group was working in the center.

“Report, Doctor.” The Admiral shouted back.

“We think we cracked it! It’s powered on!” Said the excited voice, and that changed the Admiral’s demeanor entirely. He turned his back to her and began to move towards the work group, and at a distance she could hear the unknown technician explaining something to the Admiral. Something about not needing a key anymore.

“Bring her here!” The Admiral shouted, and the soldiers lifted her stretcher up and brought her closer to the center of the room.

“Can you activate the dais? The interface?” The Admiral demanded to know.

“Yes, Sir! We have the locking mechanism fooled into thinking it has a key, the dais should operate now as if we have the artifact. Lord Andross was right!” Another technician, another ape, explained with equal excitement.

“Of course, he was!” The Admiral replied. He stepped boldly onto the dais. A holographic wave of energy passed over him from foot to head before flickering. A dull tone sounded in the room from unseen speakers. A series of four tones, then the holographic wave vanished.

“Sir, that was not wise! We don’t know what it will do!” The original technician, an ape with a bright red face and scruffy grey facial hair, cautioned him, but the Admiral only smirked in reply.

“Lord Andross knew this was the key, and what good is a prisoner if they can’t be used to test if a weapon works. Prepare her, Doctor Boone. I want to see if it kills her when she’s put in the interface.” He said and nodded to the soldiers presently guarding her. None of the soldiers seemed to know what he meant by ‘prepare’ her.

The technician, or doctor, who must’ve been their head scientist, stepped over to the group of soldiers surrounding her.

“Strip her down! The dais won’t permit inorganic compounds to interface with the Temple. Strip her, strip her!” He demanded, prompting the jackal next to her to produce a knife.

“No!” She shouted and fought against her captors as the jackal sliced through her shirt, her khakis and even her underwear. She was sobbing fresh tears and they tore the tattered remains of her clothing off her body, then two men hauled her into the air and onto her feet.

Her eyes burned hot as they dragged her painfully across the cold floor, but the Admiral stopped them.

“Had you just been a little quicker to tell me what I wanted to know; this might have gone different.” He told her, and a rush of anger filled her heart and she spat at him, her spit pegging him across the cheek.

He backhanded her across the face, then ripped her from the soldiers’ arms, his height and size more than a match for her small frame, delicate by comparison. Screaming in pain as her ribs cried out in anguish, the Admiral dragged her the rest of the way to the dais, and then with only his left hand he forced her to stand naked in the center of the dais, his grip tight on her arm. She shivered and wept as she struggled in vain to cover herself from the eyes of a dozen or so men, her tail tucked between her legs.

The hologram activated and the wave of energy rose up her body and stopped past her ear tips before drifting back down again. When the wave finished its journey a different solid tone sounded in the room, and the dais began to glow bright blue beneath her.

A flash of light appeared, a cylinder of brilliant blue blasting from the metal surface of the dais towards the ceiling, and in an instant a material began to form around her body. The Admiral shrieked, jerking himself away from the dais, his arm now severed at the wrist with what remained of his hand disintegrating within the translucent blue material.

Krystal’s vision turned blue as the material enveloped her fully, her body frozen in place as she was completely surrounded by the substance. The thought of drowning came to her briefly, but then her whole world fell into darkness as she was at last fully consumed.

Those outside the dais’ reach were in a panic as the Corporal was busy trying to stop the flow of blood from the Admiral’s stump. All around them loud thunderous tones echoed through the ruins, the noise contrasting against the pleasant hues of the silver and blue metal. Doors were sliding shut with soldiers and extraneous personnel fleeing in a panic to get on the better side of every door they came to.

Still in the central chamber, where the girl had once been standing now floated a large crystalline structure, taller than a man and thicker than a door’s width. With its many sides, it slowly rotated in the air, and the dais began to rise from the floor to reveal itself as a pedestal, and from the ceiling a matching cylinder descended, locking the object in place. When it was finished all they could see of the girl was a dark blue silhouette of a frozen figure trapped within.

Within the crystal, there was a voice not Krystal’s own speaking into her ear, and it spoke in a strange tongue.

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The sky overhead began to change colors, catching Fox's attention. Looking up, thinking at first that he was seeing an Aurora Borealis, it became clear that the sky was... turning into water?

"Something's going on with the sky here, ROB Is this something special that happens on Sauria?" He asked, and after several long moments the android replied.

"Fox, there appears to be an energy barrier surrounding the entire planet of Sauria." The android replied. Fox continued to stare up at the sky, and its blue shimmering hues. So, did this mean he was on his own down here?

Chapter 03//IMPRISONED

<< EarthWalker Territory, Planet Sauria >>

With jungle all around him, Fox discarded his white vest and red scarf and left them in the cockpit of his Arwing. He didn't need to give away his position any more than he already was with his white boots. The uniforms they wore as a part of the Star Fox Team was not suited for an infantry campaign, but at least the green of his jumpsuit would help hide him amidst the trees where his orange fur could not.

The sky was still shimmering steadily overhead, and the noise of fighter jets were far off in the distance. When Fox had first dropped through the atmosphere, he'd been ambushed by cannon fire, and had been forced to land his Arwing to avoid detection. If it wasn't for his Arwing's ability to hover he'd have not managed to squeeze his machine through the jungle canopy like he had. He hoped the trees would be enough cover to keep his Arwing hidden.

Without air support he was grounded, and Fox knew that hoofing it was the only sure-fire way to get to where the civilians were. He'd logged their coordinates into his headset display, the small visor giving him a small compass to follow and an estimated distance of over 20 kilometers. What a hike this was going to be.

If he didn't run into any Imperial troops, he might get there in four to five hours.

He wasn't a botanist, so Fox wasn't even sure if you'd classify this terrain as a jungle or just a forest. Almost mountainous, the terrain was uneven and densely packed with evergreens that gave way to something more akin to palm trees wherever water was present. The palms seemed to thrive wherever there was an abundant source of H₂O.

Fox had to recall his days from the Academy, and how he'd wished they'd given their pilots more training for situations like the one he now found himself in.

When he left his Arwing he set a timer on his headset to record how long he'd been traveling, and now after thirty minutes of movement he altered his ETA by adding an hour. He knew the direction to go in, but the terrain was in his way with every step he took.

He'd navigate quickly through a section of trees only to come to a ravine cut in the earth that dropped the elevation by thirty feet. He'd have to stop and either climb down or find a way to navigate around it.

At least he had the trees to keep him company, but he knew this was just the calm before a brewing storm. Sooner or later, he'd have to draw his blaster, but for now the only sign of life around him was the planet itself, leaves rustling, birds singing, all of that.

"How are things up there?" Fox thumbed his radio.

"ROB doesn't detect anything else in orbit. I think we got them all, Fox." Peppy was the one to reply.

“We’ve also heard back from the General. He’s ordered the Katina fleet to mobilize and there on their way. They should be here within the next few hours.”

“Great. Can you get ROB to do some scans of the planet? I want to know what I’m up against down here.”

“He’s already started that, but the barrier around the planet is making it difficult. We can see the planet, but The Great Fox can’t scan past the barrier no matter what he tries. Falco and Slippy have been doing flybys to see if they can damage it from our side and neither laser fire nor Smart Bombs have had any effect.”

“Have you tried using The Great Fox yet?”

“We don’t need to. Not long after the barrier went up, we could see a light show happening a few hundred kilometers from your position. It looks like someone was trying to shoot their way out with some pretty powerful weaponry.”

Fox leaned a hand onto a nearby evergreen and sighed.

This was very weird. It made sense that no one could get to the planet from outside the barrier, but if this were some ploy by the Imperials, then why would they be shooting at it from the inside? Is this not a part of their plan? What even was their plan anyways? Why wait eight years to come to this backwater planet to harass some archeologists?

If he were in their shoes, he’d have kept hiding until some kind of opportunity came up to strike back. Not give himself away by taking hostages! His intuition was whispering to him that there was another reason they’d come to Sauria.

“Peppy, can you and ROB get with the General. I want you to start asking questions about why Imperial forces would want to target Sauria.”

“You think there’s something more to this?” The hare asked.

“It wouldn’t shock me if Andross had plans for Sauria, Peppy. He had plans for everything.”

“Will do, Fox. Anything else?”

“No, not for now. Going radio silent for a bit. I’ve got a lot of walking to do if I want to get to where I’m going.” Fox replied and started off again.

After all the odd jobs the Team had been forced to do over the last few years, it felt like this mission was paying them back in interest. Mysteries atop of mysteries, and he didn’t have enough intel to sort it all out on his own right now. Maybe if he could find the civilians here and talk with them, he could learn more.

An hour later, he heard the roar of a distant explosion. It sounded like it was from a few dozen kilometers away, and he could see a light show through the tree canopy. Looks like they were testing the barrier again with weapons fire, and it was a big gun, too! Peppy had said they’d detected weapons fire just like this, but hundreds of kilometers away. How spread out was the enemy, he wondered.

But that wasn't going to stop him. He was hardly even halfway to his destination.

More explosions, from the same direction and at the same intensity. The light show revealed little more than it did before. The weapons fire continued for several more minutes as the Imperials fired several shots into the barrier overhead. At no point did the shimmering blue barrier appear to weaken.

"I hope they're wasting ammo doing that." He muttered to himself as he hopped over an overgrown root.

His compass was pointing him across another ravine, but this one was too wide to jump across, and so he climbed down the edge and slid down the side. Snaking down the middle of the ravine was a creek with clear running water, so Fox unhooked his survival canteen from his belt, swallowed down a bit of its contents, then refilled it with creek water.

He stood in place shaking the canteen in his hand so the built-in filters could purify the water, scanning his new surroundings. The ravine slithered through the earth like a serpent, and instead of wasting the energy trying to climb up the other side he decided to follow it, going northeast. Maybe he'd find an easier way to climb up if he went further downstream.

A few minutes into the ravine and he noticed the birdsong had mostly gone silent, and he casually thumbed the safety off his blaster, but left it in its holster. As the minutes passed the more uncomfortable he felt staying in the ravine with its steep walls, but he'd already committed to this route and there didn't appear to be any easy ways to get back out.

The walls were either too steep or had been battered too smooth to grip from past flood waters. The birdsong never returned, but there didn't appear to be anything with him in the ravine as he followed it and the small creek to its natural end point. An hour had passed since he'd first climbed down, and now he was standing at the crest of a waterfall. There was a lake some 100 feet below him, and no easily apparent way to get down.

Carefully looking down the cliff face, Fox could tell he'd wandered right to the edge of a valley. The terrain elevation sharply dropped here and to either side with the valley ahead of him stretching out for miles like a sea of trees with evidence of more palms and sources of water scattered throughout.

He noticed spots of brown and gray in the trees several miles away, but his eyesight wasn't so keen as to be able to tell what they were. With no obvious signs of civilization, he pulled out his High-Def Display Device and zoomed in on the distant objects.

"Statues?" He muttered.

A few of the structures looked vaguely like people, and the Display Device estimated distance revealed these objects were further away than where his coordinates were telling him to go. He kept scanning, slowly panning the Device across the valley in search of anything that stood out, and then he found the spots of gray he'd seen before.

Almost hidden behind the trees he saw modern architecture, silver-gray buildings interconnected to each other with 'spokes'. Prefab buildings. He lowered the display and felt confident he was heading in the right direction.

“Now I just need to find a way down.” Talking to himself as he hooked the Device back to his belt.

A limb snapped behind him, and his ears perked. It came from behind, and to his right side. When he turned away from the cliff, he found himself greeted by several stockily built figures. Reptilian natives, mostly bare of clothing, stared him down with primitive weapons in their hands. Fox let his hand gently glide next to his blaster.

“Hello?” Fox began tentatively, watching them all carefully with quick panning of the eyes. “I’m looking for people like me that live in the valley.”

Each figure was a mix of orange and brown with great frills atop their heads tipped with small horns. Their leathery skins were covered only by a loincloth with half of them wearing gold jewelry on their bodies. Of the seven men Fox counted four with primitive projectiles, a bow with a quiver slung behind the shoulder. They each had their bows drawn with an arrow nocked.

“Oei uho eih fhajedoh! Thef ke Oeih bdooj!” One of them shouted in a foreign tongue.

“I don’t speak that!” Fox shouted back.

“Ke oeih bdooj!” The figure shouted more aggressively, repeating something of what he’d last said.

Who did they think he was? If the Imperials made a bad reputation for themselves could Fox count on these natives to know the difference between the Leader of the Star Fox Team and a bunch of Imperial troops?

“Kousx xam ke bdooc, Fhadso Tricky!” He shouted again, but his attention was drawn to the skinniest one in the group, a younger looking male with purple on his frill. The young male, bow in hand, let loose his arrow and he instantly felt his jumpsuit rip at his knee, staggering backwards with his hand instinctively reaching for his blaster.

Fox had to assume the natives were too apolitical to care which team was trespassing on their territory, and so he leapt backwards off the cliff, holstering his blaster back, and tucking his head between his arms. As the wind roared in his ears, he inhaled deep until he met water.

The lake caught him like a thin plank of wood, hard enough to hurt but weak enough to snap under his weight as the water consumed him and he sank beneath the surface. He saw his headset sinking into the depths, but he swam after it, seeing his own blood clouding in the water. He snatched it before it could sink beyond his reach, but as he swam up for air arrows penetrated the surface, the sound of their impact echoing through the water.

He stayed under and swam hard, putting his headset between his teeth to free up both hands. With his next backstroke he let his hand brush past his holster, finding his weapon was still there, and he kept swimming as the air in his lungs rapidly left him. Arrows continued to hit the water around him with one hitting him in the shoulder. The water slowed the arrow down too much to sink the head into his flesh, but it still stung like hell as he left a cloud of blood in his wake.

With his lungs now empty of air he had to come up, seeing the shoreline was a few dozen feet away from him. Gasping for air, he inhaled big, then ducked back down again and went as deep

below the surface as he could. As his breaststroke took him toward the shore, he finally saw the lakebed, and soon enough he was able to set foot to sand, forcing himself out of the water as foreign shouting echoed from the top of the cliff with arrows landing way too close to him for comfort.

Staggering onto land he collapsed onto the shoreline before crawling upright and rolling into his best sprint, his wounded knee screaming at him that it was injured, but not enough to keep him from running. Fox took the headset from his mouth and put it back on. He thumbed his radio, but nothing happened. Was it not waterproof?

Fox broke through the tree line with his only means of knowing where he was going, soaked through with water. He remembered the view from the cliff and understood the general direction he needed to go in, so he ran in the direction closest to that.

Limbs and brush whipped at his face as he fled, the shouting still far off in the distance as it didn't seem any of his attackers were brave enough to jump off a cliff to chase him. Now, with a bunch of natives after him he didn't have the luxury of carefully plotting his course, and he still had miles of ground to cover with no way to radio for help.

He slammed his fist into the nearest tree as he ran by, recalling that no help could ever come with that barrier surrounding the planet! Fox really was on his own down here!

Through the trees ahead he thought he could see the forest opening up into a clearing. With his pursuers so far behind he could widen the gap between them by sprinting through the clearing and onto the other side. He broke through the tree line and tripped over a wire on the ground. A trap!

He looked back and saw he'd tripped over and snapped a long piece of twine, and suddenly he saw there were more pieces of twine stretched out across the ground in large grids.

Scattered around him were natives, all wearing looks of fear and panic as they began to scream and shout, their fingers pointing at Fox who only now realized he'd tripped and fallen into a crop of tubers. He picked himself up, swearing under his breath that the Academy didn't spend more time giving their pilots basic infantry training to help avoid situations like these!

The shouting and commotion from the village farm attracted all the warriors, and Fox found he couldn't just run straight across the fields like he'd hoped. He had melee combatants in front of him, and then more sprung up at his sides all closing the gap. He reached for his blaster, and it wasn't there.

As the warriors all closed in around him, weapons drawn and bows lifted in the air with strings drawing back, Fox did all he could in his situation. He lifted his hands and slowly got down on his knees.

<< EarthWalker Village, Planet Sauria >>

Fox was now bound by the wrists with heavy rope, being led through the village at spearpoint. The wound on his knee wasn't as bad as he'd thought, but it was enough to make him walk with a slight limp. The arrowhead had only sliced through the side of his knee, leaving an ugly gash in its wake. One of the dinos had tied a cloth around his leg to stop the bleeding, but not much else was done.

By the looks of things, it was bleak. He had no radio, no weapon, and no way to talk himself out of his situation. None of the villagers looked happy with him being there, and quite a few seemed afraid of him.

He noted that all the natives he saw looked like they were of the same race.

Fox hadn't been well briefed on the primitive peoples that lived on Sauria, but he understood enough to know there were multiple tribes all split apart on racial grounds. He didn't know which tribe this was, but their village was very large, and he was now being brought to a stone structure. It was a very square building maybe 400 yards wide on every side, consisting only of a solid stone ceiling supported by many large pillars.

A spear jabbed him in the back when he lagged too much behind the villager ahead of him due to his limp. He sped up, wincing from the pain in his knee. At least his hands were tied in front of him rather than behind, he thought.

He was then led up a small flight of stone steps and onto the stone slab that was the structure's floor. There was a big male, another native, seated on an ornate throne made of twisted branches and carved wood. Fox was led towards him, who had two braziers lit behind him, and to his either side he was flanked by a number of other natives of mixed sex. All of them were painted with ornate designs and wore various kinds of jewelry.

Something that really stood out to Fox about the big, seated figure was that around his neck hung a suspiciously modern looking gold necklace. It certainly wasn't something a primitive tribe could put together. It was too perfect in how uniform the chain was and hanging off of it were what appeared to be gold and silver rings. No different than what you could find in a jewelry store on Corneria. The rings all boasted a different color gemstone from rubies to sapphires.

Peculiar.

"No rheiwxk kxo adkhitho, mo ceht." One of his captors started speaking to the big male after dropping to a knee. It was all more of the strange foreign tongue Fox couldn't parse if he tried. The village clearly had a chieftain of some sort, and this big male had to be him. He was tall and thick with muscle but had too much padding on him to be a leader that got down in the trenches with his subordinates very often.

"Udt noho kxoho udo meho ev jbo tolacj eik cihbadw?" The big one replied, leaving Fox to wonder what his options were.

He was surrounded by armed natives, most of them very well built. Fox wasn't trained infantry; he was a pilot! Without his blaster, and with a bum knee, he didn't have the means to fight his way out of this. What did this tribe do to outsiders, he wondered? Was the big guy going to be wearing something of Fox's after they were done with him?

“No veidt dedo rik kxaj vihho edo.” The other reptile replied. Fox really didn’t like being left out of the loop when his life was on the line!

“I’m Fox McCloud. I am the leade- OW!” Fox was jabbed painfully in the back, his effort to assert himself being cut off.

“Jacodso!” One of the lizards shouted at him, and Fox chose to bite his tongue.

“Rhadw kxo jbo jxumud.” Their leader said in more of that accursed tongue of theirs. One of the natives standing at his side quickly left the building altogether while the rest all patiently waited.

Fox could only quietly seethe as his exhaustion and injuries fueled his frustration. Minutes passed until the native returned, whispering something to their leader. Shortly thereafter Fox lifted himself higher on his knees with surprise as a short middle-aged looking tapir stepped into view. The older man was dressed in a dirty white lab coat but was otherwise the first modern person he’d seen on Sauria.

The tapir saw Fox and stepped along the edge of the gathered natives so he could stand next to the village leader. The leader started talking in foreign tongue to the tapir who in turn quietly listened until the lizard had finished speaking. With a nod the tapir turned his attention to Fox.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Fox McCloud, and I’m the leader of the Star Fox Team.” He was allowed to finish his introduction this time, and the tapir tilted his head sideways with a hard look of concentration overtaking his expression.

“Can you prove that?”

“I can show you where my Arwing is parked if that’s what you want to know.”

The tapir turned to the village leader and started speaking in the native people’s tongue. It didn’t sound fluent, but it was clear he’d learned to speak it. Was this one of the civilians?

“Are you a part of the archeology team? We received a distress signal and were sent here by order of General Pepper of the Cornerian military.” Fox asserted himself again.

The tapir turned back quickly to look at Fox, then back again to the village leader speaking quicker with growing excitement. Fox watched the exchange with curiosity as the middle-aged man seemed to get more and more agitated as the village leader continued to sit on his throne. The reptile’s eyes were fixed on Fox the entire time with his hand lifted to stroke the underside of his chin with a knuckle.

“Xo mijk ro vhoot! Xo aj xoho ke xocf!” The tapir finished, almost exasperated.

In the distance there was a new commotion, and Fox tried to turn to see the cause, but a spear stopped him. Somewhere behind him there was a moving crowd speaking in the same foreign tongue, and moments later new natives emerged into view to confront both Fox and to present themselves to the leader. Many of them looked familiar with the skinny young male who grazed his knee being among them.

This led to new chattering between the group, their leader, other reptiles in the mix, and even the tapir as they all spoke rapidly. He couldn't understand a word of it, but it was obvious they were talking about him with a few figures pointing fingers at him angrily.

Eventually the tapir caught control of the crowd and started chattering insistently to the newcomers, and soon after that he turned back to the leader with a lot to say to him. After this lengthy exchange, the village leader grunted and waved a hand at Fox, and someone stepped up to his side to kneel, taking a knife to Fox's bonds. The ropes were cut and Fox at last could move them freely with his hands instinctively reaching to rub at where the rope had cut through his fur.

"I'm so sorry, Sir, err, Mr. McCloud! We didn't know if our distress call had made it out!" The tapir exclaimed and hurried to Fox's side to reach for him, trying to help him to his feet, but Fox's injured leg buckled when he tried. The tapir started shouting at the lizards standing around him and shortly after Fox found himself being tended to for his injuries.

A half an hour later and Fox found himself inside a hut made of palm leaves and thatch, seated on a blanket folded into a cushioned seat. A young dino female, garbed no more modestly than many of the males, had tended to his wounded knee. Using a paste-like salve she numbed the pain and stitched him shut with a bone needle and some thread.

"You see, when I went missing, they raided all of the villages in the area. I think the only fortunate thing about it was that they didn't scorch the earth to find me."

The doctor, an engineer by trade, told his story as Fox listened and ate treats off a clay plate. The village had suddenly become very warm to him now that they knew he was here as a friend. Fox doubted they were familiar enough with the history of the Lylat system, who Andross or the Empire were, or even the Star Fox Team. They just knew he was there to shoot the other guys.

"How bad was it?"

"A number of their warriors were killed, anyone who resisted. Not all of them since many were out hunting. When I'd finally arrived here on foot it was so tense, but when I told the King that I'd sent out a call for help, that friendly warriors would come to help us, they softened to me. I honestly don't think I'd still be here if it weren't for all the kindness we'd given them."

"Kindness?"

"Gifts. We knew we were settling in EarthWalker territory, so we basically bribed them into allowing us to stay, and to get permission to study the ruins and to do our excavations. We'd order a bunch of surplus supplies and give them everything we didn't need. All of it was cheap to us but were luxuries for them. We've turned them into coffee drinkers! The women even gifted some of their jewelry to King EarthWalker. You might have seen him wearing it as a necklace."

At least Fox didn't have to worry about them being cannibals that wore your clothing after they finished you off with a burp.

"So, why exactly did Andross' men come here?" Fox popped what he thought was a date into his mouth, its sweetness explosive on the tongue. The Tapir was looking uncomfortable.

"The work we do is fascinating, but... not profitable. I'm only here for the potential technological study, but if you could see the ruins, they are not in any state that requires someone with my skill. We've barely uncovered anything that could be called technology. The others love it, but I was here waiting for a big breakthrough!"

He continued as Fox continued to chew.

"So, I'd started looking around the net for someone who might be interested in buying old trinkets. Some wealthy idiot that wanted a broken pot in their private art gallery. I sold a few scraps here and there when I didn't think anyone would notice. I had one buyer that bought a few things, spent money like a gambler, and he was insistent on me keeping him updated whenever we found something new. He bribed me with promises of a lot of money, but after my last update I stopped getting any kind of response from him."

"How long ago did you lose contact with your buyer?"

"Maybe... a month? Last thing I mentioned in the update was we'd dug up our first intact piece of hardware. We don't know what it is, but it was a handheld and had room for what we thought was a power supply. Though I did describe it in more detail than that since it was in writing."

So, it felt like someone was taking advantage of the doctor's greed. Could it be they were after something specific, and felt it so important to acquire that they'd come out of hiding just to get their hands on it?

A female entered the hut holding a folded cloth. When she sat it down next to Fox, she unfolded it to reveal his blaster and headset, both of which he'd lost during his capture.

"Thank you." Fox told her with Dr Tappa translating on his behalf as the female backed herself out of the hut before vanishing behind the pelt curtain.

"Can you fix this?" Fox said, handing his headset over to the tapir. "I jumped into a lake and busted my headset."

The tapir took it into his hands and examined it before pressing his thumb into the case release. The earpiece popped open, and Fox watched as the doctor shook water from the device and blew air into it.

"I don't know this type of hardware intimately, but if it's military grade and manufactured within my lifetime I'd imagine it's not broken. Yes, ok, your seal was broken to begin with. The rubber around the casing is starting to dry rot. Water got in and shorted a fuse. I can fix this once I'm back in my hut."

"They haven't come back to search for you?"

“They parked my hut over a cellar they dug to keep some of their produce. I moved my equipment underground and they threw a blanket over the entrance, but no, they haven’t come back to the village since I first escaped.”

“Any idea why that might be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they’ve got more to worry about with that energy field overhead?”

That’s a good point, Fox thought.

“And what of the others?”

“I don’t know. King EarthWalker sent his warriors out to scout our camp, but my colleagues weren’t there when they arrived. It’s all guarded by soldiers now, too. I’d imagine they took them somewhere else, but I don’t know where.”

“If I can get to your camp I might figure out where they were taken. Can you fix my headset before I leave?” Fox asked, popping another date into his mouth.

“Of course!” The tapir said as he began to rise to his feet.

“Another thing!” Fox stopped him.

“Yes?”

“Can you fix an Arwing?”

“I... perhaps?”

Fox stood to join the doctor and gestured for him to exit the hut. As the two of them emerged, many of the villagers stopped their tasks and watched the pair with curiosity as Fox followed the man back to his hut.

“I took some damage while flying down to the planet. G-Diffuser is out of commission and the engine wasn’t giving me full output. I don’t think it has the power to get me off the planet. You’re an engineer, right?”

“I am an engineer, but I’ve never done manual labor on a space fighter!” He replied.

“Well, can you try?”

“I... yes, I can try. I just need to know where to go.”

They reached his hut, and Fox followed the tapir down the wooden ladder and into a cellar that reeked of vinegar and salt. It was now being used as the doctor’s hiding place and workshop with his personal belongings pressed into a dirty corner of the hand dug room. Not much equipment was present, but Fox recognized some of what he saw as communications related. The doctor began to work on his headset at a low table, removing the old fuse and carefully soldering a replacement into place.

"It's not the same fuse, but it'll work. Just don't get it wet again, since the case isn't airtight anymore." Dr Tappa replied as he popped the casing back onto the headset and handed it back to Fox who immediately put it back on his ear and thumbed the radio. Nothing. He removed it, pressed the On switch, then put it back on. Now the visor was waking up to show him his display. He thumbed it again and the radio crackled to life.

"Great Fox, this is Fox McCloud, do you read me?"

"Fox!" Slippy answered after a few moments.

"Hey, Slip, can you give me a status report?"

"We've been trying to reach you, what's going on?"

"My radio broke after I slipped in a river." He lied. "I just came into contact with one civilian, who helped repair it for me, and a tribe of natives. The civvy is an engineer, Slippy, so if you want to lend him a hand in talking him through some Arwing repairs, that'd be great!" Fox told the toad.

"Ok, I can do that, but I think you're gonna want to know that the cavalry's here!"

"Is that Fox?" He heard a muffled voice shouted from somewhere distant.

"Yeah! His radio broke, but it's fixed now." Slippy replied.

"Fox, you had us worried!" It was Peppy, now sounding much clearer.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I don't have much news to report, but sounds like Corneria finally arrived?"

"Yes, and they've come in a full show of force. Reminds me of old times."

"Sounds good to me, but can they get through that barrier?"

"Field." The tapir corrected him.

"No, no luck there. They're telling us it's the most solid energy shield they've ever seen and that they didn't think something like this was even possible to make. They can't imagine the amount of energy that'd be required to keep a field that strong around an entire planet." Peppy replied.

"That's really advanced stuff, Fox." Slippy added.

"Well, maybe if you keep poking it, you'll find a weakness." Fox suggested.

"Thermal energy. Several miles underground we've got readings of a power grid of some kind." The doctor interjected.

"The engineer here is suggesting its thermal energy from the planet's core. There's apparently a power grid miles deep into the planet's crust."

"That would be enough power, but we can't really turn off a planet if that's what is fueling the energy field." Slippy replied.

“Something tells me the Off switch is where I’m going to have to go. I guess I should probably get on that.” Fox told them with an exhaled following.

“Be careful, Fox. We’ll keep you updated if anything comes up and try not to break your radio this time!” Peppy replied.

“I will, Peppy. Fox out.” He said, thumbing his radio off.

“Doctor, the Great Fox’s radio channel is A27-1997. I want you to get with Slippy, he’s our mechanic, about repairing my Arwing. It’s out... somewhere back the way I came. Let me give you the coordinates.”

With Fox’s headset working again he could bring up his GPS, which still held in its memory the last known location of his Arwing, and his primary destination. He was still a long way away from the research facility, but at least he had his compass back.

“I’ll do whatever I can to fix your ship. Oh! You should take this, I think.” The tapir said and started fishing through his box of parts.

The doctor pulled out a strange metal object, gold in color with blue painted engravings. He passed it over to Fox, who took it in hand and rotated it around to examine the object.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, but this is the thing I told them about before they ghosted me.” The tapir replied.

Fox continued to examine the device in his hands, wondering if it was just a coincidence, or if this thing really was important.

<< Force Point Temple, Planet Sauria >>

“Admiral, all units have submitted their reports. We’ve had no success in breaching any of the bulkheads, and the fleet hasn’t managed to find a weakness in the Planetary Defense Field.”

Admiral Scales watched as his bandages were being changed on his wrist. Where once a hand had been there was now nothing, and the large cerulean crystal that now floated in the center of the chamber had taken it from him.

He nodded to his Lieutenant once he’d concluded his report. They’d all been trapped inside the Temple for nearly two hours now.

“Order all our troops to evacuate the Temple’s entrance. Have the Grand Gambit fire its main gun at the doors.”

“Is that wise, Sir? We have personnel trapped in that section of the Temple.”

“We’ll all die if we can’t find a way through those bulkheads. Convey my command to the Grand Gambit.”

With that the Lieutenant nodded gravely, the coyote snapping him a salute before turning to make his way back to his post at the communications relay. Over a hundred of his men were trapped inside the Temple, and his entire fleet was sealed inside the PDF that enveloped the planet like a cage. The Cornerians were surely on their way now, and he had no means of launching a strike against them when they arrived.

“If we can get you back to the Grand Gambit, we should be able to fit you with a prosthetic, sir.” The medic told him as he worked to clean his wound again.

The Admiral nodded. He didn’t like the idea of having a cold replacement affixed to a stump, but it was better than having nothing at all.

The medic finished his work and administered another dosage of painkiller to help dull the pain. The Admiral stood, flexing his remaining hand to remind himself of what’d he’d lost from the other, before walking across the chamber towards the science team responsible for researching the Temple’s interface.

“Report.” He demanded.

His Chief Science Officer, an ape by the name of Doctor Edward Boone, extracted himself from his computer equipment to greet him. Several members of his team were arrayed around the floating crystal with the device hooked up to a myriad of machines and scanning equipment. As soon as they’d tested the device on the girl it had sealed her up inside and the entire facility went into a state of lockdown, turning the Temple into a tomb for everyone trapped inside.

“Nothing so far, Admiral. It’s a struggle just to do anything more than peek at the surface of the Temple’s brain.”

“Then what does this ‘surface’ have to say?” He growled.

“It seems to think we are intruders, or pathogens, depending on the translation. The girl triggered it, but likely any one of us would have had the same result if we’d tried. Since it wasn’t a Krazoa activating the device, I suspect it tripped a failsafe.” He explained, running his thumb along the edge of his jawline to smooth his fur.

“If she was removed from the crystal would that disable the lockdown?”

“I cannot say. We can’t even tell if she’s alive, but I surmise that she’s not given the material is not porous enough for oxygen to pass through its shell. If we found a way to break through the material that may lead the Temple to think we are an even greater threat to its safety.”

“Are you suggesting we can do nothing?”

“No, Admiral. We’ll continue to study the device, and I believe that if we were able to fool it into thinking we had an activation Key, then we can fool it into deactivating the lockdown. It’s just a matter of time before we make a breakthrough, Sir.”

“See to it that you do, Doctor.” The Admiral replied, casting a glare down at the shorter man that left him withering under his gaze. Scales pivoted to step away, trying to relax himself by placing his hands behind his back, but with one claw missing it felt too awkward, so he left his arms to his sides.

Ruminating on their situation, Scales knew they had supplies inside the Temple, but with their fleet so close at hand they’d grown soft. Most of their supplies were left aboard their ships under the belief that they could easily shuttle down anything they needed at a moment’s notice. That softness was going to cost them now if the science team didn’t find a way to end the lockdown.

After a careful inspection of the supplies they had on hand, it was believed that they’d begin seeing casualties in only a few days. Many of his soldiers were trapped in their own small spaces with their only rations being what they’d carried on their person. Elsewhere, like in this very chamber, they had supplies to last themselves a month, maybe more, if they rationed it all tightly. Something needed to change soon.

Scales turned, now striding towards the communications relay and the small team that manned it.

“Admiral, the Grand Gambit is changing course and preparing to fire on the main bulkhead. We’re evacuating all external personnel now.” Lieutenant Kanis told him when he noticed the Admiral’s presence.

“Good.”

There was little more for him to do at this point, but his patience hadn’t run out yet. He’d waited eight years for this moment so what did a few more days matter? With all their enemies trapped outside the PDF they had no way of attacking his fleet. They might have been trapped down here, but they were also safe until they found the key to their prison, and he was optimistic that with that very same key he could also unlock the path to annihilating everything in orbit around Sauria.

Including The Great Fox, which reminded him of something he wanted to ask.

“Is there anything to report regarding the Arwing that dropped through the atmosphere?” He asked the Lieutenant.

“No, Sir. They haven’t sent us an updated report so they must still be searching.”

“If they can’t find a smoldering wreckage then it must be assumed it’s in hiding. Inform the fleet to be alert, that there is one confirmed hostile on the planet.” Scales issued his order.

The Lieutenant agreed and began to convey the new orders to the rest of the fleet. Scales didn’t know who it was that fell planet side, but it didn’t matter. Every pilot in that accursed team was responsible for the death of the Emperor, and they would all die in their time.

Chapter 04//INFILTRATION

<< EarthWalker Territory, Planet Sauria >>

His GPS was telling him to go a different way, but Fox trusted his new guides. The King of the EarthWalkers gave him a small group of warriors to help him find the research camp, and they were making good progress. The language barrier had proven a hindrance at first, but with his radio working again Slippy was able to figure out what kind of translation software the science team must have been using when they weren't speaking it themselves. It was nice being able to communicate with his companions now, even if it was strange to hear everything spoken twice, once in real time as a foreign language and twice as a playback in his ear after the software had translated it.

"We will be there soon." The Prince told him. The young male was in the lead with three other men. Fox was there behind him, and he wasn't sure if the other warriors were here as companions for Fox, or just to protect the young Prince. Fox didn't feel like the young dinosaur was quite ready to be leading a band of warriors into battle.

The pace they were making impressed him, since his GPS kept trying to update his ETA with shorter and shorter estimates that were dropping faster than he could have expected. Knowing the terrain really helped in navigation, as his guides were now proving.

"Have they been patrolling the area since they attacked your village?" Fox asked, but none of the group could understand him, so his headset had to repeat to Fox his own sentence in Saurian. He repeated the translation back to the group, and badly at that. He'd have to tolerate this clunky way of talking the entire time they traveled together.

"No, they have only kept to the offworlder camp." One of his companions replied through translation.

"Not interested in any of the local cuisine, I guess." Fox replied, choosing not to translate the entire thing back to the group.

Andross surely had some reason to be interested in this planet, and that's why his goons came all the way here. That metal thing hanging off his belt might have something to do with it, but the engineer had no idea why. Fox figured if he could locate the other scientists then maybe they could tell him what this thing was and why the Empire might want it.

But what did Fox know? They could be after something completely different.

An explosion erupted somewhere off in the distance, and Fox felt the vibrations through his feet as the shockwave scattered the birds from every nearby tree.

"What was that!" The Prince shouted and fell to the ground, one of his companions taking him by the arm and lifting him back to his feet. They all looked to Fox as if he had the answers.

"Sounds like a powerful weapon was used. Several miles away. Far away." He replied. The four dinos look uneasy, and why shouldn't they? How often was it that a primitive people like them, or even any normal person on Corneria, got to feel the shockwave of what felt like a giant bomb

going off? Fox knew what war looked and felt like, and he hoped that the Empire was just getting bored and wasting time and energy on target practice. He could only hope they weren't targeting any villages.

He urged the group to keep going, and when Fox's GPS began to display that they were within a few hundred meters of the research camp his guides all slowed their pace to a crawl and together they crouched through the trees towards their destination. The camp was a lot larger than Fox had expected, with the prefab buildings now becoming visible through the thick brush and trees thanks to their solid white construction.

There were ample places to hide as Fox pulled out his HDD and zoomed in on the camp through the gaps of foliage. The buildings looked intact, but there was a toppled structure at one end of the camp that had probably been a comms tower. There were other signs of fighting, evidence of fires that had been put out. They must have rushed in to take out their ability to call for help before sweeping the facility to round everyone up.

All he saw now were a few soldiers patrolling the camp with some ferrying an ATV loaded with boxes to a nearby shuttle. Maybe ten or more soldiers were present, which didn't seem to be enough troops for this kind of operation. Fox simply didn't know enough about what he was going up against here.

He signaled to the others to remain put as he crouched and inched a little closer to the tree line so he could get a better view. Settling in at the base of a large tree he used a bush to conceal himself as he watched with the naked eye for a few minutes. The ATV was being used to ferry boxes to the shuttle, each time coming back empty so that it could presumably be filled with more boxes. Stealing supplies? Probably.

There were dark clouds in the distance, and he wondered if he'd have to deal with rain, too, now. He pulled up his HDD and zoomed in to see. The clouds were dark like soot, billowing up from the ground, and that's when he realized it wasn't a storm cloud.

"What did they do?" He whispered to himself.

At least the smoke was coming from the opposite direction of the EarthWalker village.

"What are we going to do?" Prince Tricky asked, having snuck up behind him.

Fox had to think about that, too. He needed to actually get to the camp first, and then maybe he could figure out where to go from there. Dr Tappa didn't have any clue to give him, but his instincts told him to push ahead into the camp and start sniffing around.

"I need to get into the camp, but I don't know how without them spotting me." He replied. There was a good fifty feet between the tree line and the building nearest him. There were too many idle eyes out there standing watch for him to just sprint across the grass.

"We can distract them!" The Prince replied, almost sounding excited, before shuffling quietly back to the other three EarthWalkers to tell them that Fox needed to sneak into the camp. The four of them deliberated with Fox's headset catching and missing bits and pieces of the dialogue. There was too much being lost in translation for him to know what they were planning.

"Don't do anything dangerous!" He whispered to them in bad Saurian.

The group then shifted away from Fox and into the brush where they vanished before he could stop them. He turned back towards the camp and lifted the HDD back up and scanned the camp. Business as usual, but now he had to worry about finding his opening to move if the others did manage to create a distraction.

A few minutes passed before Fox heard a commotion far off to his right side, like someone whistling angrily. Checking the camp, he saw three of the soldiers on watch take notice of the trees, one of them thumbing his radio. All normal activity stopped in the camp with the ATV driver stopping and hopping out, loosely shouldering his rifle.

There wasn't anyone looking in his direction, so Fox bolted. Keeping his profile low he crossed the fifty feet to the side of the nearest building, pressing his back to the white material before checking that he was out of anyone's line of sight. Once he was certain he was in the clear he crept around the back of the building, checking that everything was still clear as he went. He found a door and quietly climbed inside, hoping no one was on the other side.

With the door shut behind him the coast was clear. He was in some kind of small laboratory. Judging by the equipment this room might have been their field hospital, but the shelves and cabinets all appeared to be ransacked of supplies. Passing quietly through the room he found everything had been emptied out of valuables, but resting on the island in the middle of the room there were a few boxes of mixed goods, vials of medicines, bandages, and the like.

Footsteps were coming towards him from the corridor, and he ducked low behind the island and drew his blaster, thumbing off the safety.

Someone entered the room, closed one of the boxes by taping it shut, then picked it up and left. Fox peeked over the countertop and saw the door had been left open with a soldier walking away, box in hand. Cleaning the place out alright.

Fox stayed low and crouched his way quickly through the opened door and down the hallway. His ears had never been so alert before as he snuck his way down the hall checking doors as he went. Some of them were left open, and he found a lot of small offices and bedroom areas. More footsteps were coming his way and he ducked into a bedroom whose door had been left open.

He didn't dare shut the door and alert them that something had changed, so he pressed himself into a corner of the room next to the doorway and waited for the footsteps to pass. He saw two men walk by the doorway towards medical, then Fox switched to the other corner anticipating that the men were there to gather the last of the boxes before leaving.

And he was right.

"Think they were hunting?" One of them said to the other as they passed the doorway.

"Maybe, but if they try to hunt anything in this camp, they won't have time to regret it." The other replied with a laugh.

When Fox was sure they were gone he began to relax, and silently thanked them for clearing up the mystery as to how the Prince was able to provide him with a distraction.

He noticed the bedroom he was in had been ransacked, too. Clothing and personal items were strewn all about, and it was clear that it had been a married couple. About the only thing that wasn't broken or out of place was a single photograph resting on a work desk, almost like the scavengers had one ounce of decency left for the people they were robbing. It was just a photo of a middle-aged fox and his wife hugging a young girl between them. All three had the blue fur Cerinian foxes were known for. He smiled, but not happily. This little girl's parents weren't having a good time right now.

He comforted himself with a better grip on his blaster then peeked out into the hallway. With no sign of anyone coming he crept out and began to check more rooms. No one else was in this part of the facility, and certainly no prisoners. The further he went through the rooms the less he saw of living quarters and the more he got offices and labs, and just like everything else he'd seen so far every room was ransacked for anything of value.

There was noise ahead, so he slowed his pace to a crawl and pressed himself against the corridor wall. Voices in an adjacent room.

"How soon the Captain want the shuttle ready?" A voice asked.

"I don't think he's in a hurry, but within the next half hour I'd imagine. They're still trying to strip parts off that totaled ATV." A reply.

Fox neared the edge of the door, and risked peeking into the room. It was a mess hall, with a handful of men eating food out of the science team's pantry.

"Glad I'm not going up there."

"Damn right! Place is cold like Fichina was."

Where would this place be, Fox wondered? Certainly not close by since this region was the tropics. They probably had a basecamp set up somewhere far away, maybe even in a remote area to help hide their presence. Fox continued to hover by the door and listened to their small talk, hoping he could glean some useful information from them, but nothing new came about after a few minutes of listening.

He couldn't walk past the open doorway, but he could sneak back the way he came until he found another exit. Creeping back through the hallway he found an exit leading outside and pressed his ear to the door to listen for anyone standing outside. When he heard nothing after a minute of waiting, he popped the door gently open and crept out onto the grass. He was behind the facility now, so he ducked low and crawled along the perimeter of the facility until he heard more voices coming from a distance.

The building he was next to was elevated enough for him to drop to his belly and shimmy underneath it. There was a shed next to this building, walled up with sheet metal, and what sounded like a mechanic working. More voices, but nothing loud enough to discern until Fox had crawled his way close enough to listen in better.

"This is a waste of a good machine. It was probably brand new."

"Well, even if you fixed it back up the brass didn't talk like they'd be sending that shuttle back for anything other than our own hides."

Fox crawled along further, passing behind a set of steps that lead up to another doorway into the facility. The grass was overgrown underneath the building, so he had the good fortune of being hidden from view despite having a full foot of clearance between the ground and the base of the building.

"Maybe another ten to fifteen minutes. This engine block wasn't made to come out clean."

"Alright, I'll let the Captain know. How many guys you gonna need to put it in the back of the ATV?"

"Me, and two more, should do."

"I'll let him know."

A soldier stepped out of the shed and into view, a rifle slung casually off his shoulder. Fox watched through the grass as the soldier continued his way out of view. So, there was only one person in the shed now, it seemed. He wondered if there was only one way to get inside the shed. He could see the shuttle parked a few hundred feet away, but that was way too far to make on his own. As much as he needed to hitch a ride to wherever they were headquartered at, he needed help to do it.

He needed to find a way onto that shuttle. If they had a base somewhere else, and the science team wasn't here, then that meant Fox had only one destination left on his map to try. He crawled to the edge of the building and pulled himself out quietly, then dropped low and crept behind the shed in search of an entrance that didn't face the open field in front of the facility.

The shed was large, several meters wide, with a solid sheet metal wall for a backside that offered him no entrance. Creeping around to the far corner he peeked around, saw no one and kept going. Coming to the edge of the shed he peeked again and saw the nose of an ATV staring at him. No driver.

Leaning out a bit more he saw a soldier fighting with the front end of a different model of ATV. It looked banged up judging by how twisted the roll cage was. Looked to Fox like someone had wrecked it previously. The good ATV was shielding him from view, so he stepped quietly out from behind the shed and crawled underneath the vehicle.

It was large enough to carry multiple men with a truck bed mounted behind it that the troops were using to put all their boxes. The ATV was presently empty, but soon it would have an engine block sitting inside it, and they'd have to drive it to the shuttle, wouldn't they?

The driver had parked the vehicle in some thick grass, so Fox hid within the strands and waited. No one thought to pay attention to the underside of the ATV so when two new faces showed up to help lift the engine block out of one ATV to put it in the bed of the other, Fox went unnoticed. He hooked his feet on the chassis and found a place where he could cling with a tight grip, and hoisted himself up off the ground, flattening himself to the bottom of the ATV before the driver could crank up.

For several uncomfortable minutes Fox rode out the trip from the shed to the shuttle, and then the slow process of backing the ATV up into the shuttle's cargo hold. When the driver finally parked, it sounded to him like they were planning on leaving the ATV in the shuttle for transport.

“Just leave it in the back, let them sort it out.” A voice said, walking away from the ATV.

“We don’t need it?”

“Toadie’ll be back with the other one in an hour.” The original voice replied before the sound of footsteps carried their voices away.

Fox was alone in the cargo hold and lowered himself to the floor before shimmying himself up towards the front of the ATV where he’d be less visible to anyone looking. There were stacks of boxes strapped to the walls of the shuttle with little room to stand. They’d packed it tight with as much material as they could get away with.

He had to wait several more minutes before someone came back to close the back of the shuttle. When the coast was clear Fox crawled out and secured himself in the parked ATV as the shuttle made its launch preparations. The Academy didn’t teach him much about ground combat, but they did teach him plenty about thinking his way out of a pinch.

Once they were airborne the journey was a smooth one, if a little long. He was in the shuttle for nearly an hour and used the time to radio the Great Fox that he was currently in transit to an unknown destination.

<< DarkIce Mines, Planet Sauria >>

It got colder the longer they were in the air, and he was beginning to worry he might have made a strategic mistake in leaving his jacket back at the Arwing. He also had to find a way to get out of the shuttle undetected. When the shuttle touched down at its new location, he knew he wouldn’t have much time to make a plan, so he figured a runaway ATV might work as a good distraction. He checked and saw that the keys were still in the ignition, then searched the ATV to see if it had a Jack, which it did. He pulled it free from the bed and kicked it under the front of the vehicle.

He quickly put the ATV into neutral before crawling under it so he could start jacking up the front. He had to hold the ATV to help keep it steady, barely keeping it still long enough for him to turn himself around so he could look out behind the ATV with his feet dangerously close to the jack stand.

He waited for someone to open the shuttle door, then carefully pulled himself back up flat to the underside of the vehicle just like he had before, then once the loading ramp was out he kicked the jack out from under the ATV, slapping the wheels to the floor before rolling backwards with the weight of the engine block giving it all the momentum it needed to zip down the ramp with the loading crew diving to the sides to avoid being run over.

The panicked soldiers quickly calmed down, angry at the ATV with one of them coming to investigate the vehicle, only to curse that the crew that had loaded it had failed to set the

parking brake. Thankfully, that was all that the soldier did as he quickly turned back to the shuttle with the others to begin assessing the cargo.

It was freezing cold! Fox had little time to plan his next move apart from getting out from under the ATV and being anywhere else. From his low vantage point, he saw he was in a mountainous environment, snow covering nearly every surface. So cold! He only had his jumpsuit, which was poorly insulated for this kind of environment!

The landing area had been mostly cleared of snow, leaving just bare rock where the shuttle had been coming and going. Fox lowered himself to the ground and carefully checked his surroundings. There were several other shuttles parked in the area with soldiers milling about in the distance, but none were particularly alert. He took his chance and crawled out from under the ATV when the shuttle crew was distracted, and quickly ran towards another of the parked shuttle craft. Using it as a shield, he shivered from head to toe as he struggled to cope with the new temperature. They'd flown very far north! He thought to give the Great Fox a call, but what would he tell them? With their sensors being blocked by the energy field they'd have no way to locate him on the planet.

He crouched low and checked around the shuttle to see if it was clear. Lots of soldiers around, a dozen or more were here at least. There was evidence of a lot of foot travel leading towards some kind of ravine. A narrow pathway with nothing he could use to hide.

Making his way towards the edge of the encampment he made sure to obscure his tracks in the snow behind him. With the energy field overhead, the Empire must have felt very comfortable that no one would be out to attack them here. Once he was deep in the wilderness surrounding the camp the only thing he was concerned with was the cold.

He traced the edge of the camp through the snow until he came across another encampment. Fox knelt and studied it for a few minutes with his HDD. Dozens of tents were set up with more soldiers here than there were at the landing pad. He could count them all with the help of their breath being visible at a distance, which made him grow cautious of his own breathing, so he grabbed a handful of snow and bit into it to cool his mouth down.

Fox crept around the edge of the camp, creeping close and checking tents as he went until he came across one with bunks. There was a space heater running in the middle of the room and Fox was excited to get near it, but there were men sleeping off their shifts in some of the bunks. Slipping carefully under the tent wall he hid himself behind one bunk where he'd be less noticeable and simply sat still to enjoy the warmth, letting his body temp rise back up to something much more comfortable. The sleeping soldiers had the good idea of letting the heater run at full blast so it didn't take long to warm back up.

When he snuck back out of the tent it was still way too cold for him to be able to handle it for long, and he still had more tents to check. Further down the row of tents was a larger one with smoke coming from a vent at the top. There wasn't much else to it, but there were voices as he crept near.

"-and this is done. I need someone to take it down."

"For?"

"The prisoners. I'll have another pot ready in a half hour or so."

Fox could smell the food now. This tent was the mess, and it seemed like his luck was rewarding him. Creeping to the edge of the tent he waited to see if anyone would walk into view on the other side of the tent. There was another ATV parked out front, but no driver. He couldn't see the backside of the vehicle, but he heard voices and a small commotion just out of sight, which was making the ATV rock up and down. A soldier stepped into view, then a second one, and they both boarded the ATV and cranked up before driving off.

Now that he had some direction to follow, he made his way back to the edge of the camp before dropping to his belly when he heard loud voices shouting something in the distance. He waited a full minute before lifting himself up to a crouch, checking around him to see everything was clear.

Moving again he put distance between himself and the camp until he felt confident he could stand, before sprinting in the direction the ATV had driven. The terrain was just as rocky and mountainous as it was down south in the jungles. This made navigation harder, but he had a compass and a good set of legs. His injured knee hardly even bothered him now that he was cold as hell.

The terrain made another sharp drop, but instead of finding another camp he found several palletes of supply crates, and one tent that didn't appear to be occupied. It was a smaller area than the camp he'd left behind, but Fox was now at the base of a mountain, with its many peaks visible several miles off in the distance. He dropped down amidst the supply containers and found there were no soldiers posted here, but there was a lot of evidence of recent foot traffic, and then wheel tracks coming and going. The snow had mostly melted from the vehicle traffic, and Fox could see that the trail led to an opening in a cliff face, revealing a large cave. With no one around to spot him, he jogged to the cliff face, pressed tight to the rock and carefully peeked inside.

The cave mouth was twenty feet wide with a lot more evidence of vehicle traffic.

Everything looked natural, but strangely melted, some of the rock looked like black glass, probably obsidian. There was a history of volcanic activity here then, he thought.

Judging by the fact that there were light fixtures installed on the cave's ceiling, Fox figured they'd been here a lot longer than the original 33 hours General Pepper had told them. It wasn't anything fancy, just hanging lights with their power cords slung freely between each fixture. This could have been an advance team sent to plan their attack on the research camp, but why put so much effort into this operation?

The further in he went the warmer it got, further proving that there was some volcanic activity not just in the past, but even in the present. There were echoes of men and machinery in the distance, and he was growing worried that he'd be spotted before too long. The cave was absent of anything he could use to hide behind, so he increased his pace and hoped the sound of his footsteps weren't loud enough to alert anyone to his presence.

When he reached the end of the passage, he found a large chamber with smooth walls and a rounded ceiling, and much of it was made of pure obsidian. Ancient lava flow must have carved out these caves, which were now being used as a convenient base of operations where no one would detect them. On a primitive planet like this a military camp would stick out too much on the surface.

The Empire had set up a large encampment, but it seemed half empty now, like a lot of their group were missing and off somewhere else. Now that they'd sprung their trap and had taken their hostages they didn't need to hide as much as they had before, perhaps? He hid behind the base of a large stalagmite that rose dozens of feet into the air. There were more stalagmites and stalactites littering the cave, and many were so large that they'd had to have formed over the course of thousands of years.

Fox moved around the edge of the cave, keeping himself as far away from the camp as possible. He counted three ATVs and several tents. They had enough supply crates to last them months, assuming it was all filled with provisions. He doubted it was all food, but he didn't want to think too much about how well armed they might be.

Of the three ATVs he couldn't see one with food in the back, but it had taken him so long to get here that they'd likely already served it up, but to where? Where would they be holding prisoners? The tents didn't look large enough to hold a large number of prisoners, and they wouldn't use a tent for that anyway. They'd want to use a cage or holding pen of some kind. He continued to sneak around the perimeter, dodging the gazes of patrolling soldiers, until he was behind their camp and next to another cave mouth.

There were more lights inside the passage, same as the one he'd entered in from. No one seemed to be watching the camp too carefully, and again, why should they? There's a giant force field around the planet and all their enemies are outside it. Except for Fox, of course, but how would they know he'd stowed his way up north from the jungle?

He crept inside and found it empty, the lighting running along the ceiling led him to a series of rooms. Each room was more like an ancient air pocket that had been trapped in the lava flow, but large enough to easily work as storage rooms. None of them had doors, except for one. They'd mounted metal bars to the opening of one of the pockets, so Fox carefully approached it from the opposite side of the cave and ducked into an adjacent pocket.

His eyes widened, there were ten... twenty... thirty-eight people crammed into a single cell with hardly any room for them to stretch out, and they were eating the meal that Fox had followed on his way here. The pot was just sitting in the middle of the room with the prisoners eating from small tin bowls.

"Psst." Fox signaled quietly. He did it again after a few moments until one of the prisoners noticed and looked through the bars.

Fox made sure he was visible from his place in the opposite room and held his finger up to his lips. The prisoner's eyes went wide as saucers as he turned to the others and quietly got their attention, pointing now towards Fox. Two men approached the cell bars.

"Who are you?" One whispered.

"Fox McCloud of the Star Fox Team."

There was a moment of shared disbelief, but the men turned back to the attentive crowd of prisoners, and there was a great amount of whispering. Another man came to the door, a middle-aged looking fox, and knelt near the door before gesturing for Fox to come closer. Fox leaned out from his hiding spot and looked back from where he came and saw it was clear, then

ducked low and crouched his way quickly towards the cell door. When he made it, he pressed himself against the dark wall of the cave with his shoulder put up against the bars. He kept his eyes down the cave to see if anyone was coming, glancing towards the prisoners only to make eye contact with who he was speaking to.

"You've come!" The older man said with so much relief that it revealed just what it must have been like for them these past few days.

"I'm here, but not in the way you'd like." Fox replied, and then began to explain the situation they were all in.

Not only could Fox not break them out of their cell, but there was no way off the planet. He explained in as much detail as he could that there was an energy field surrounding Sauria, and that there were a lot of Imperial troops on the planet with only Fox here to help them. The scientists weren't happy to hear any of that, but they seemed resigned to their fate by now.

"So, is there nothing you can do?" One of the men, an elderly badger, asked.

"No. After I was shot down, I was on my own, and had to make my way on foot to your camp. I did make contact with one of your colleagues, a Dr Tappa. I'd wouldn't have made it as far as I did without his help." Fox hoped that letting them know their colleague was safe would boost their mood.

"Tappa!" The badger hissed, and the other around him had to shush him silent.

"He's why we're all here!" The fox then said angrily. Bringing up the Doctor turned out to be a bad idea, he noted to himself.

"Did you find our daughter?" A woman, a Cerinian vixen by the look of her fur, asked. Fox looked her in the eye and saw she'd been crying heavily, the bags under her eyes were as gray as ash.

"I- I haven't met anyone else while I've been here. I'm sorry." He said, and the woman deflated and began to quietly weep while another lady next to her pulled her into a tight embrace. The other fox bowed his head in defeat, just as defeated.

"I can't help you escape, but I'm not giving up. When I was with the Doctor, he volunteered to work on my Arwing, so it'll be fit to fly again soon." He tried to boost their spirits with news that all was not lost. Finding the prisoners in this state was made all the worse to him now that he knew the photo, he'd been drawn to in the camp had been some cosmic joke of foreshadowing. If these two foxes were the same couple in the photo, then their daughter was here on the planet, and she couldn't have been too much older. She was just a teenager!

He then remembered something else that the Doctor had told him about, the artifact! Fox reached behind him and found the device and pulled it free of his belt and showed it to the sullen fox across the bars.

"He gave me this and said it might be important."

"That!" The fox replied but cupped his mouth in fear that he'd been too loud. Fox leaned a bit out and saw no one coming. They were in the clear for now.

“They questioned us all about where Tappa had gone, and where that artifact was. They were desperate to find it and they took our daughter from us to- to interrogate her.” The fox, now just a grieving father, replied grimly. The Empire had the girl then.

“Do you know what this is?” He asked him, but the elder fox shook his head.

“No. We never got to test it.” He replied, then lifted his head with a wide-eyed look before turning back towards his colleagues.

“Rand! The crystal!” The fox asked of an elderly man, a pelican. The bird looked suddenly surprised, then calmed himself before grabbing the bottom of his chin pouch while reaching inside mouth with his other hand. Fox was baffled at first, until the man produced a blue object he had hidden in his mouth and started rubbing it dry on his coat before handing it over to another in the crowd who then passed it along further until it reached the elder fox.

“They weren’t looking for this, but we hid it anyway. I think it’s a power supply, a kind of battery, for the device you’re holding there. We couldn’t figure out why they wanted it so badly, but if this crystal was important to the function of that device, we thought it best to hide it amongst ourselves so it couldn’t be used.”

He offered the small object through the bars and Fox took it, rotating it in his fingers. Looking back down at the device he saw only one place where something like this crystal could possibly go, a small diamond shaped socket on the side of the larger end of the device, so he plugged it in. The other fox leaned back suddenly as if he expected something to happen, but nothing did.

“If it’s a battery, then it’s a dead one.” Fox commented.

“We were never able to test it properly. We intended to, but that was before we... were attacked.”

“Do you know who is in charge here? Overhead anything from the guards?” Fox asked, to change the topic. So far, he’d neither seen nor heard anyone refer to a boss apart from a Captain, but he doubted a Captain would hold enough rank to organize this kind of operation.

“Admiral Scales. We’ve only seen him once, when we were first interrogated about the device and Dr Tappa’s whereabouts. He’s more dangerous than anyone else we’ve seen here, and they’re all fiercely loyal to him.”

Fox didn’t know this Scales by name, but if he was an Admiral during the war, he must have been fighting in a different theatre.

“I don’t know that one, but I’ll take your word for it and watch out for him. What’s he look like?”

“A tall grim looking Dinosaur, but I don’t think he’s a Saurian native. Green skin, muscular.”

“Got it. Any idea where he’d be? Is this place their main base of operations?”

“No, there were more soldiers here, we could hear them, but they’ve all probably gone to the Graveyard.”

“The Graveyard?” Fox asked, leaning out a bit more to check that the cave was still clear.

“It’s the ruins we were studying. Named after the statues, it’s where we conducted our excavations. We’ve overheard them talk about it a lot, like it was important, but they somehow knew its proper name already.”

“Proper name?”

“We translated enough of the Krazoan language to figure out a few things, but I doubt they could have gone through our notes quickly enough to grasp it themselves so quick. What we’ve been calling the Graveyard they’ve been calling the ‘Force Point Temple’. There’s not enough surviving text from us to understand what the Temple’s purpose is unfortunately.”

“Force Point Temple, huh.” Fox whispered, looking back down the cave tunnel.

The Empire, no, Andross, had a reason to be interested in this planet, and he doubted that these soldiers were smart enough to know what that was by random chance. They had to have gotten information from the big guy himself to know that something was here, and now they were all going to this ‘Force Point Temple’ and acting like it was important to them. Why would Andross have been interested in a place like that?

“Is that translated right? Force Point Temple?” He asked the other fox.

“Yes, I believe so. Milton?” He said, turning away towards the elderly badger from before. “Are you certain that it’s translated as Force Point Temple?”

“Best as we’ve determined, yes. That is the proper translation.” The badger replied, furling his brow as if offended that his translation had been questioned.

Fox continued to eye the cave, and envisioned all the soldiers he’d seen so far, and remembered the explosion he’d felt earlier in the day. If Andross had been investigating a backwater planet like this during the war it certainly wasn’t for antiques and clay pots. He wanted to win a war!

“What do we, in our language, call the ‘point where our forces gather?’” Fox asked of the scientist, casting his eyes to the others who were listening intently.

“Our forces?” The fox queried, then turned to his colleagues.

“We’d call it a military base.” Fox answered them, feeling confident that he now knew why the Empire would come to Sauria. The collection of scientists were silent in the face of that fact, and none offered him any alternative.

“Well, I know where I need to go now. I can’t help you escape, but I’m doing everything I can given that I’m all I’ve got.” Fox said and began to stand.

“Wait!” The Cerinian woman pleaded, pulling herself away from her colleague and crawling towards her husband. “You have to find our daughter, please!”

Fox stood, and looked her in the eyes, then to her husband. He nodded.

“I’ll do everything I can. What’s her name?” He asked.

“Krystal, she’s- please-“ The poor woman began to sob against her husband’s arm, who pulled her in close.

“I’ll do everything I can for her, that I can promise you.” He assured them, passing his gaze across the rest of the prisoners. He nodded again, then stepped away from the cell and quietly made his way back down the cave tunnel.

<< Unknown Location, Planet Sauria >>

[You Are Not A Master. Compliance Requested.]

The void around her was absolute, bathing her in inky darkness. She’d given up her struggle against her prison, as she didn’t even know if she still had a body to fight with. Her only companion was the strange voice that spoke in her head.

[What Are You?]

“Krystal.” She replied.

The feeling of mental exhaustion was all consuming. No matter what she did she felt like there was something chaining her down, holding her mind hostage as she seemed to float in this endless sea of emptiness.

[You Are Organic. What Are you?]

“My name is Krystal.”

[You Are Not A Master. You Are Not Native To Primea. One Hundred And Twenty Two Hostile Organics, Threat Low, Occupy Stronghold Primea. One Thousand Eight Hundred Fifty Seven Hostile Organics, Threat Low, Occupy Sector Thirty Three. Define Your Purpose For Incursion.]

“What?”

Krystal found it difficult to think with the void around her acting as a smothering force that clouded her mind and made her thoughts run slowly through her mind like cold syrup. What was the voice asking her? What was Primea? And a stronghold? Such large numbers, too...

[Define Your Purpose For Incursion.]

“I don’t know what you’re asking me! I can’t think.”

[You Are Not A Master. Numerous Incompatibilities Detected. Cognitive Decline Expected. Reducing Cognitive Load To Enhance Subject Performance.]

As the voice spoke the blanket of darkness around her began to fade to a dark shade of prussian blue. Her world shifting from black ink to a cold blue sea, just as empty and just as vast. It was chilling to see something so much more familiar, and fear gripped her as the depths around her tricked her spirit into seeing things that weren't there, like creatures waiting in the depths for her to cast aside her gaze so that they might strike.

[Define Your Purpose For Incursion.]

"I- I have not incurred on anything!"

She shouted this time, the heavy weight she'd felt before had lifted, her thoughts running clearer, her memory coming back to her. The attack on her family, her colleagues and friends, the failed escape into the Graveyard... So much had happened, and then she was brought here! They dragged her here and they'd abused her! Her anger piqued, but then was quickly washed away by tears she couldn't shed. She remembered being stripped and forced to stand naked in front of all those men, she wanted to cry!

[You Are A Prisoner.]

"Please, let me go."

She didn't know if she was sobbing. In her heart she was, but without a voice of her own in this empty sea she had no way to know if she had a tear to shed to express her anguish. Where were her parents? Was there even anyone coming to help them, to help her?

[Request Denied. Hostile Organics Still Present In Command Chamber. Are You Their Prisoner? Confirm.]

She paused, and felt herself nod, or tried to.

"Yes, and they took my parents! And everyone else!"

[Request For Deep Scan Access. Confirm.]

"What?"

[Requesting Confirmation.]

"I don't... ok?"

[Request Granted. Submitting Subject To Deep Scan.]

Her world reverted to pure black in an instant, a smothering sensation enveloping her as she seemed to drown in the sea of ink she'd been dipped into. Just as she felt herself begin to struggle against the waves of panic induced by the choking void, her head began to hurt. It was dull at first but grew and grew until she thought she was going to split open; she was at the brink of screaming!

Then the blanket pulled back and the darkness began to fade again, her thoughts clearing up, the threat of drowning drifted back like a withdrawing tide. Her headache faded as the color of

the void around her changed first to the familiar dark blue hue and then again to a bright shimmering shade of cerulean like her own familiar fur.

The light around her seemed to flicker with sunlight through the waters of clean beaches. There was no more oppression or pain in the space where she seemed to float.

[Interim Navigator Verified. Forty Organics On Primea Match Scholar Designation In Common With Interim Navigator. Compiling Report On Hostile Organic Insurgents For Review.]

She had no idea what was going on.

Chapter 05//REPRISAL

<< Force Point Temple, Planet Sauria >>

There was no need to inform him that the Grand Gambit's attempt to breach the door had failed. The power of his flagship's main gun had sent vibrations through the entire facility. The strength of Krazoan construction was admirable, but even they weren't capable of deafening the shockwave of a direct hit. When Lieutenant Kanis arrived to debrief him on the breach attempt, he already knew what to expect.

"Admiral, the Grand Gambit reports that there was no effect on the bulkhead at all. Our troops stationed on the other side of the door have mild injuries from the impact, but that's the only damage they've reported. The door is unscathed."

"Remarkable, isn't it? This ancient tomb."

"Sir? Should I have the Grand Gambit ready for another attempt?"

"No, it'll have no effect. If it can withstand a direct hit from the main gun, then this facility was built to survive even an orbital impact."

"Yes, Sir. That is the report, Sir, unless you would have me do something more?"

The Admiral had seated himself at a distance from his men, watching from afar as the science team continued their efforts to breach the door they'd all entered from, but also watching as his command coordinated his troops inside and out. With the energy field overhead they had no reason to fear the Cornerians, so Scales had ordered his men to continue their duties as if situation normal.

There was a hiss to his right side, and by the time he'd turned to face the doorway it was already sliding open to the cheers of everyone inside. The men who'd been trapped on both sides of the door greeted each other with relief. There was good news at last.

"Admiral, I believe we've cracked the code!" Dr Boone shouted to him with triumph.

"Excellent! Pass your 'code' to every team in the facility that would have the means to use it. I want every door opened at once!" Scales shouted back.

"Lieutenant!" He then barked at his senior officer.

"Sir!"

"Update the Grand Gambit and the rest of the fleet with the news of our situation and have them ready themselves for combat. All units should be at a moment's ready should our circumstances change!"

"Yes, Sir!" The Lieutenant snapped a salute and pivoted on a heel to return to communications. The science team was already busy with their own radios signaling their findings to everyone in the facility while the others moved their equipment out and towards the next sealed door.

Progress at last, he thought with a smile.

<< DarkIce Mines, Planet Sauria >>

On his way back through the cave tunnel Fox narrowly avoided a pair of guards that were coming to retrieve the pot of food and the utensils. Hiding in a storage pocket he waited until they'd gone by before quietly continuing back down the way he'd came. The camp was just as relaxed now as it had been before. Skirting by its edge and following the cave wall was as simple as it had been the first time.

The only thing that had him concerned now was traveling back to the jungle. He got lucky with the free ride the first time, and he didn't know how often those shuttles were planned to ship out, and to where they'd be going. Last thing he needed was to accidentally wind up on an enemy cruiser with only his blaster and an ancient paper weight hanging off his belt.

Sauria's winter cold was biting him in the face again as soon as he'd freed himself from the caves and hid himself from plain view by entering the nearby forest. The caves had warmed him up a bit, but now he was back to the biting cold of the worst weather he'd been in since... Years. He spent too much time in space.

In the distance he heard an ATV running but didn't pay it that much mind. Perhaps it was the one from before carrying food, the cook had mentioned he'd have more food ready, didn't he? That was probably it, so Fox continued through the snow and past the camp that housed the bulk of the troops stationed above ground. When he reached the landing pads, he saw that there was new activity with two shuttles being loaded with crates. They looked like they were in a hurry, but so was he. If one or both of those shuttles was going somewhere then maybe he could hitch a ride, and if he needed to, he could 'suggest' a destination.

Fox moved his way to the far side of the camp and watched the troop movements in detail with his HDD. One shuttle launched, leaving just the one left on the tarmac with its engines pumping out steam. Realizing his ticket out was going to take off soon he had no choice but to slip down into the camp and hurry out of view before being spotted. With the mingling soldiers distracted by their duties it wasn't hard to reach the shuttle.

"Is that the last of it?" Someone, possibly the pilot, shouted.

"Two more crates, then that'll do it."

Ducking around toward the nose of the craft he saw he was clear and took a bold peek around the side of the shuttle to see the pilot standing with his back turned to him as other soldiers busied themselves with a forklift loaded with two crates like the ones he'd seen stored on the other side of the camp.

If that was the pilot, then no one was in the cockpit! He moved back around to the other side of the shuttle and jumped up the side and grabbed the bottom rung of the access ladder. After pulling himself up he peeked through the window, saw the cockpit was empty, and that it was a

two-seater. He popped the hatch and dipped inside the cockpit before shutting the hatch behind him and climbing into the back to hide behind the pilot's seat.

A few minutes later the hatch on the opposite side of the craft opened and someone climbed inside, shutting the hatch behind them. Fox reached up to his headset and thumbed in the coordinates of the research camp.

"Operator, Shuttle 102 loaded. Requesting Clearance for launch, over." The pilot was talking through his radio.

"Roger, lifting off for the Temple LZ, over"

Good! Fox waited until they'd been in the air for about half an hour before making his move.

"Howdy!" Fox shouted, surprising the pilot out of his boots before pressing the barrel of his blaster against the ape's cheekbone. "Mind taking your helmet off for me?"

The pilot cautiously complied, removing his helmet, and his radio, and setting it down on the console in front of him.

"Good, now keep going where you're going so I can get captured by your friends at the Temple." Fox lied. He didn't have any intentions on landing where the pilot thought he'd be landing.

His unwilling pilot dutifully flew him towards their mutual destination. The trip was silent, apart from the muttered comment that Fox was outnumbered and outgunned, which was all completely true! Fox was well aware of the uneven playing field, but that wasn't about to stop him from poking his nose where it wasn't wanted. If he was to figure out a solution to this mess, then going to this 'Force Point Temple' would be the best place to start. Whatever was there had clearly piqued Andross' interest.

So much time had passed since he'd first smuggled his way up north, that the sun was now setting ahead of them as they flew. Soon it would be nightfall, and finally Fox could worry a little less about sticking out amidst the trees. As they made their final approach Fox noticed a black streak of terrain, wide as a river and miles long. As the pilot continued to fly towards the strange terrain he had to ask.

"What happened there?"

"Same thing that'll happen to you and your friends."

Fox frowned and adjusted the grip he had on his blaster. He'd been keeping his weapon trained on the pilot's temple this whole time, and he was getting tired of holding his gun in the air, but the situation demanded he keep the pilot's eyes forward and hand obedient.

"Didn't answer my question." He replied, pressing the barrel a little tighter against the pilot's head.

"Shoot me and we go down."

"I'm a pilot, you idiot, now tell me what happened down there."

“That’s what happens when the Admiral’s flagship fires its main gun. It’s the Emperor’s finest weapon!”

“Uh huh, I’ve blown a few of those up in my day.”

Fox was growing concerned, but he didn’t show it. Was this the result of that explosion he’d felt earlier in the day? It was starting to feel like it. He decided that now was the time to part ways with his captive.

“Well, looks like we’re here.” Fox said, carefully using his free hand to buckle his safety harness.

“When we land, you’ll be surrounded!”

“Uh huh.” Fox replied, reaching down to his belt to grab the heavy artifact. He didn’t know what it was meant to be used for, but he was about to make it a weapon. He grabbed it by its midsection and lifted it, mentally preparing to strike the pilot unconscious so he could take over as co-pilot, but before he could engage his swing the artifact thrummed to life in his hand and expanded.

It happened so quickly that he jumped out of his skin about as hard as the pilot hit the controls. The artifact had stretched to nearly two meters in length with one end slamming into the pilot’s cheekbone, breaking the skin and tossing him against the opposite side of the cockpit before dropping face first to the console. Fox let go of his blaster and the artifact and threw his hands onto the controls, steering the ship back into a stable flight path.

Confused as to what had just happened, he ignored it for the moment and searched for a place in the jungle where he could crash land. Looking over to the pilot he felt pretty lucky, since Fox could bring the shuttle down and the pilot won’t be waking up any time soon for him to confess that he didn’t crash the shuttle himself. They’d have to take him to the nearest infirmary and wait for him to wake up before they could get anything out of him.

He shifted the controls, steering the shuttle to the left of where he wanted to ultimately be, before letting the shuttle’s nose tank downward to start a nosedive that he aborted at the last minute. The shuttle’s underbelly slammed through the jungle canopy, ripping through limb and trunk alike as the nose made first contact with the ground. Dirt exploded over the windshield just as the cockpit deployed its air cushions. The pilot was slammed painfully backwards into his seat by the force of the air bags, as Fox was slammed forward into them.

Fox snapped awake, probably having lost consciousness for a moment, the cockpit signaling a warning klaxon that several things were all going wrong at the same time. He shook off his confusion and shoved the deflating bag away as he unhooked his harness. It took him a good minute to find his blaster under the pilot’s foot, then he lifted the artifact, still at its full length, and climbed out of the cockpit, being careful to shut the door back so no one would know there’d been a second occupant.

He didn’t have time to question the artifacts’ new shape. He immediately sprinted into the jungle, grateful that the sun was falling ever lower on the horizon with the light through the trees growing a deeper and deeper shade of orange and red. Soon it’d be dark, and he’d have a much easier time navigating his way through enemy lines.

<< Unknown Location, Planet Sauria >>

[Insurgents Have Now Bypassed Containment Protocols For Gate 03B.]

She felt helpless as the voice explained that they were breaking open yet another door. The more the voice spoke to her the more she'd begun to realize that she wasn't the only prisoner here. Her captors had been trapped inside the ruins just like her, and with them their leader, but if they were opening the doors then that meant they could get out, leaving her here in the process!

"How can they open the doors?"

[New Access Codes Are Being Forged Using The Alta Negla Algorithm.]

"I don't know what that means!" She shouted in frustration. Everything the voice said was strange and foreign, talking about algorithms, protocols, sequences, like it was just a machine reading from a tech manual!

[The Alta Negla Algorithm Is The Last Security Protocol Used For Stronghold Primea Before Entering Dormancy.]

"If they are forging keys, then you can just lock the doors back!" She demanded.

[Insufficient Permissions.]

Permissions! This wasn't the first time it talked of 'Insufficient Permissions'! For a voice that was supposed to be in charge of this place it acted like it was helpless to do anything at all!

"But you closed them before, didn't you?" She was exasperated.

[Containment Of Stronghold Primea Was Triggered When Interim Navigator Krystal Interfaced With Central Command. Foreign Organic Interface Requires Immediate Containment. No Permission Required.]

"So, when they put me in here you didn't need permission to lock the doors?"

[Affirmative.]

"Who gives you permission?"

[Central Command Cannot Act Independently Without Navigator Instruction. Central Command Is Kept In Perpetual Thrall By The Masters.]

It would help her so much if it just spoke plain English! Central Command, Masters, and now this 'perpetual thrall', like it was some kind of walking thesaurus!

"So, you can't stop them from opening the doors? Is that what you're saying?"

[Insurgents Must Verify All Access Codes Prior To Breaking Containment Seal On All Gates. Verification Requires A 120 Second Time Delay During Containment.]

“So, are you slowing them down? Like, on purpose?” She asked, trying to figure out the voice’s intentions out one struggle at a time when her own helplessness screamed at her from the liquid void she appeared to float within.

[Affirmative.]

“Then you have to slow them down more! We don’t know what they want to do! There has to be something more you can do! You’re some kind of computer! Do something!” She exclaimed, wishing she still had fist with which to strike a countertop. Being a disembodied voice no different than the one she was arguing with was uncomfortable, like being disabled against her will, trapped within a body limp with paralysis.

[Insufficient Permissions. Central Command Cannot Act Independent Of Navigator Instruction. Master Programming Requires Obedience.]

“Some computer! Why would they put a computer in charge of everything if it can’t do anything!”

Her anger was piping hot, but she couldn’t feel any tears beading up in her eyes. She had no body; all she could do was think out her rage but not act it out on the world around her as a living breathing person could. Trapped in this void she truly was no different than the voice that only gave her excuses as to why it could not act.

[Central Command Has Full Control Of Stronghold Primea, However Masters Do Not Trust Artificial Intelligence. Without Navigator Instruction, Central Command’s Permissions Are Minimized To Prevent Rogue Behavior.]

What kind of rogue behavior could a computer do? Why have an AI if you didn’t trust it? This wasn’t her specialty, she hardly understood what her parents did, and they just dug in the dirt to dust off old pottery! The voice was just a computer, you just program it to do what you want it to do, don’t you? Even an alarm clock could wake you up in the morning without being told to!

“What do you mean, rogue behavior? You say that like they didn’t want you to do anything without being told to?”

[Affirmative.]

“So, a Krazoa, no, a ‘Master’,” She corrected herself, “They are the only ones who could tell you what to do? The only ones that can make you stop them?”

[Affirmative.]

The voice spoke without any emotion, as if it didn’t care either way what those soldiers did or why they were doing it. She felt disheartened, as there was simply nothing to be done, that she really was just a prisoner in a cell waiting for the end.

“Then there’s no way to stop them from getting out?” She whispered, the hope she’d been carrying, kept alive by her anger and frustration now began to dim.

“There’s no way for us to stop them from doing whatever they want with the Stronghold, is there?”

[Protocol Requires Any Foreign Organic That Interfaces With Central Command To Be Held In Stasis Until Masters End Containment. There Are No Masters On Primea. Defense Of Stronghold Primea Is Maximum Priority And Deep Scan Of Foreign Organic Krystal Confirms No Relation To Insurgent Force. Central Command Utilized Emergency Protocol Talpa Ulna Treo To Assign Foreign Organic Krystal Permissions Of Interim Navigator Until Insurgent Threat Is Neutralized.]

The voice finished, and Krystal had to take a moment to process all that it had said. There was a glimmer of something within her, like hope growing anew, but she felt fear, too. What if she was wrong?

“I’m a ‘Navigator’ now, but I’m not a Krazoa!” She exclaimed.

[Affirmative.] The voice replied, indifferent.

“How can I tell you what to do if I’m not a Krazoa? Tell me!” She demanded.

[Protocol Demands That Interim Navigator Assignment Shall Supersede Species Assignment, Interim Navigator Krystal.]

Despite how strangely the voice spoke to her, she wanted to believe that she understood what it was trying to tell her. If she still had lips, she’d have wet them nervously in anticipation of what she was about to ask.

“If I tell you what to do, will you do it?”

There was a brief pause.

[Affirmative.]

<< Force Point Temple, Planet Sauria >>

The jungle was thick enough to make it easy to hide his presence as he snuck his way closer to the Temple. He could hear in the far distance soldiers making their way to the crash site, which would keep everyone’s attention over there and not where he was going. Fox still had to assume they would keep their guard up however. They knew he was on planet, but not where.

He didn’t know enough about this Admiral Scales to know how dangerous he was, but Fox erred on the side that he was smart, seeing as how he’d managed to hide himself and his troops for eight years. That took talent.

How much time would he have before the pilot woke up and told them he’d been forced to fly at gunpoint? He didn’t know, but being knocked out didn’t usually last that long, not like it did in the movies. The artifact had hit the pilot hard though, so maybe he’d be out long enough to buy Fox the time he needed to figure out his next few steps.

When he reached the edge of the tree line the sun was dropping fast, and it was becoming harder to see by. It was his good fortune that the enemy wanted to keep everything well illuminated, because from his vantage point in the forest, he could see the spotlights they'd set up in the distance, and what he saw was chilling.

The blackened streak of earth he'd seen from the shuttle was now stretched out before him as the jungle transitioned to scorched soil. It stretched over a mile in length and hundreds of feet wide, like an almighty and angry God had reached down his hand and scooped out a trench with his four fingers. The Earth was burnt black, and he could still smell the odor of burning wood and soil.

This was supposed to be a site full of ancient ruins, but it didn't look like much of it survived. What was left in the newly forged trench were hastily made dirt paths for vehicles, and spotlights to keep them illuminated.

Fox pulled out his HDD and scanned the trench, counting the many soldiers on patrol, and settled his gaze on where the trench 'ended'. Judging by the damage Fox felt confident that a weapon of some kind had been fired at a target on the ground. A high yield bomb wouldn't create an elongated crater like this. This was an energy cannon of incredible power.

That pilot did mention something about it being one of Andross' finest weapons.

Deep in the opposite end of the crater he could see polished metal rising up from the scorched earth. This end had once been elevated terrain, probably a hill. Were they trying to uncover the Temple by blowing the dirt off? He couldn't believe anyone would be dumb enough to think that would work without destroying the Temple along with the countryside.

But there was obviously a Temple there, jutting out of the ground as polished white metal. Wasn't much to see from his position, but there wasn't much there. If his hunch from before had been right, and that the Force Point Temple was a military base, then it made sense since the Krazoa would have built it like a bunker. What he was looking at down was just an entry door.

Maybe that was it. Could they have been trying to blow the doors open? Fox put down his HDD and clipped it back to his belt. He thumbed his radio.

"Anyone awake up there?" Fox asked the Great Fox.

"Yo!" It was Falco. "You've been MIA for hours!"

"Yeah, I had to stow myself away on a shuttle. Took me north to an Imperial basecamp. Is anyone else there?"

"Uh, no, they're getting some grub, you want everyone on the bridge?"

"No, just get them to radio in." Fox replied, and waited while Falco worked a console he wasn't familiar with. A few moments later and everyone had his ear.

"Fox, glad to hear you're alright." It was Peppy, and Slippery was there, too.

"I'm fine but haven't gotten any closer to figuring this energy field out. I did; however, locate all but one of the civilians. They're still in Imperial custody, but they are safe for now. The one member I haven't found is a teenage girl, daughter of a married couple in the research team. She's probably where I'm headed now, or maybe in another camp."

"That's bittersweet news." Peppy replied.

"Yeah, and I can't really bust them out with me being by myself."

"Do you know their coordinates?" The hare asked.

Fox thumbed his headset and brought up his travel history. The energy field overhead was blocking all their sensors, but it wasn't stopping his GPS from tracking his own movement.

"I can tell you the coordinates." He replied, and began to read out the longitude and latitude, stopping part way to give them time to copy the information down before repeating himself.

"You had quite a hike to get up that far north, Fox." Slippy pointed out.

"Nah, he hitched a ride on one of their shuttles." Falco corrected.

"Give that to the Cornerians and maybe between the two of us we can figure out a way to bust them out when the shield drops. If it drops." Fox told them.

"Speaking of shields, Fox, me and some Cornerian engineers have been trying to come up with some way to get through the field, but we've not gotten anywhere. This is way beyond anything we've encountered before." Slippy jumped back in.

"Repeated weapons fire has done nothing. The Cornerians tried hammering it again with their biggest guns. Nada." Falco added.

"That and none of our more sophisticated methods seem to work either. The harder we try to break it; the entire energy field seems to respond to it by increasing its strength wherever we're trying to break through. It's like a smart shield that reacts to aggression." Slippy continued.

"And the rest of the shield doesn't seem to weaken whenever it does this. If the researchers were correct that there was a power grid deep in the planet, then we can only assume the shield is being powered by thermal energy from the planet's core." Peppy added.

Fox reached up to rub a spot between his eyes before letting out a sigh.

"If the shield is being powered by the planet's core, then it has a near limitless amount of power to draw from. Not that they're obligated to listen to us but tell the Cornerians to stop wasting their ammo and fuel cells. Save them for when they have a real enemy to fight." Fox said.

"Do you have a better idea of what we're up against down there?" Peppy asked.

"I've seen several dozen soldiers, but there's evidence to suggest they have more troops than what I've seen so far. Saw a couple of transport shuttles, but now I'm back at the original location where the researchers were doing their digs. Looks like someone tried blasting a hole into an underground bunker. I'm near the edge of a mile long crater, but I didn't see what shot it.

Assume that they have more warships and cruisers down here, but I can't tell you how many." He told them.

"Will do, Fox." Peppy replied.

Fox watched the crater, and the handful patrols all keeping watch. Would it even be possible to get to the metal structure they'd uncovered? He didn't know.

"Alright, I need to go radio silent for a while." He said.

"Be careful, Fox, and keep in touch." Peppy replied.

"Roger, out."

He thumbed off his radio and started creeping through the thinning brush and charred debris with the cover of darkness masking his approach. Even with all their spotlights there were plenty of avenues for him to take to snake his way through their patrols. Security was way too lax, as if they weren't bothered by the knowledge that one lone enemy soldier was somewhere out there, or that one of their own shuttles had just crashed.

Definitely overconfident out here, but that was good for him, since he was able to crouch low and use a pile of rubble to hide himself from the guards that stood watch outside the giant set of white doors that the Empire had failed to open. Two spotlights kept the giant set of doors illuminated, but outside that it was pitch black now with the sun having fallen behind the horizon.

Only two guards he could see, but they were armed with machine guns and full tactical gear.

He pulled out his HDD and checked them and the door. Everything around him was blackened to ash, still giving off ambient heat from the weapon's fire, and yet the door looked pristine. Unblemished. It was as impenetrable a barrier as the energy field overhead. He looked up, noted that the shield didn't seem to be influencing the ambient light any. It was just as dark as you'd expect it to be in the late evening with the overhead glow failing to reach the ground beneath it. Eerie.

If they'd gone to this great a length to open a door, then it was obvious they'd failed to enter whatever was behind it. Maybe that was why the energy field appeared overhead? A defense mechanism? No...

The explosion he'd heard was hours ago, the shield went up had happened prior to that. Strange. Were the two events even connected then?

He furled his brow with a frown, unsure of what was going on with little information to help him. Looking at the two tactical clad guards, Fox knew he wouldn't be able to take them both out to inspect the door. Even if he did, what could he do that the Empire wouldn't have already tried with their own resources? They'd even used an energy cannon on the door!

He sat back, flexing his hands on the handle of the artifact. He didn't know what to do with this thing but looking at it now he did feel it was strangely familiar. Flexing his grip again he had to wonder if it was just a staff. Had a big pointy end on one side, and a small pointy end at the other. Would the Krazoa have still used melee weapons if they were this advanced of a species?

Maybe it was ceremonial, but the weapon had the weight and felt strong enough in his hands to be a useful weapon if you knew how to use a staff. Guns and fists were more Fox's forte. Well, it did help him knock a pilot out cold, even if unintended. Maybe he could quietly knock out the gu-

"FOX MCCLLOUD!" A booming voice echoed in his ears, doubling him over until his face hit the dirt, staggering him flat as his hands reached up to cup his ears as he winced in pain, gasping as his head throbbed like his head wanted to split in two.

<< Unknown Location, Planet Sauria >>

"If you do what I say, then I command you to close all the doors back!" Krystal shouted.

[Please Define Desired Gates To Close.] The voice replied.

"The ones they are trying to open!"

[The Gate ID Must Be Provided For Central Command To Perform This Task.]

Krystal shouted into the void, her frustration roaring back to life.

"Which GATE are they opening now! Tell me!"

[Insurgents Are Currently Breaching Gates 03C, 18E, 19E, And 47L.]

"Ok, then close those gates! Close Gate 03C!"

[Gate 0 3 C Is Presently Closed. Insurgents Will Breach The Gate In 32 Seconds.]

Was it dense? If she had her hands and hair, she'd be using the former to rip out the latter! They were forging access codes to breach the gates, then they had to wait 120 seconds for the code to be verified...

"Deny, stop the verification for access codes on Gate 03C!" She rephrased her command on a gamble. If it was true that she had to tell it to do everything, then she probably needed to be SPECIFIC with her requests.

[Verification Denied. Gate 03C Is Secure.] The voice replied, confirming her suspicion.

Triumph at last!

"Deny verification on Gates..." She couldn't remember the other gate IDs. "What are the other Gates? I can't remember them!"

The voice began to repeat the Gate numbers to her, and then right before her 'eyes' the IDs appeared in the void like translucent letters floating calmly in water.

"You can do that!" She asked.

[Rephrase Inquiry.]

“You can make words appear!”

[Interface With Central Command Supports All Manners Of Display Mediums. Text, Audio, Video Can All Be Provided Upon Request.]

“Show me the gates!”

Suddenly, three shimmering squares of light appeared before her, all adjacent to the floating text of numbers. The light of each square quickly faded to be replaced with vibrant color and Krystal then found herself watching surveillance footage of three teams working to force open the gates.

“I can’t hear them.” She said, “I want audio!”

[Affirmative.] The voice replied, and suddenly there was sound. She could hear the crews all talking amongst themselves, then one team cheered as the gate opened.

[Gate 19E Has Been Breached. A New Attempt To Breach Gate 03C Is Being Initiated.]

“No! Close Gate 19E! Lock it!” She shouted, panic overtaking her as she watched the soldiers on the screen begin to pick up their tech equipment.

[Closing Gate 19E.] And the gate began to shut again, forcing a soldier who’d already walked through to duck and roll under it to rejoin his companions.

“What was that! We just opened it!” One of them shouted.

“Did you fuck something up unhooking it?” Another asked, the third of the trio frustrated and confused.

“I don’t know, I unhooked it the same way I did the other three doors.”

“Well, shit, try it again.”

The three began to hook their equipment back up to a socket in the floor.

“Ok, good!” She said with relief, then looked at her list of gates. “Deny verification on gates 03C, 18E, and 47L!”

[Verification Denied On All Specified Gates. All Gates Secure.]

But even having stopped the gates from being forced open didn’t mean they couldn’t be opened again! The teams were already trying to forge new access codes to open the doors, and the voice began to read them off one by one, with the list of gates under siege only growing as Krystal began to understand just how many teams were dedicated to unlocking every door in the Stronghold. Every time she put a stop to one effort, another took its place. She wanted to say she couldn’t do this forever, but could she? Is this all she had the power to do?

If Dr Tappa had managed to call for help, then there would be help coming wouldn't there?

"Is there a way we can call for help? The Krazoa? The Cornerian Army!" She had to ask.

[Central Command Sent Out A Distress Call When Stronghold Primea Went Into Containment. There Was No Response.]

"Shouldn't they be upset that one of their planets is being invaded!"

[Central Command Has Not Detected A Master Signal In 3,462 Cycles. A Response Is Not Expected.]

These were ruins! Of course, it'd be thousands of cycles, or years, since the Krazoa were last in the Lylat System, if they were even still alive after all this time.

"What about the Cornerian Army! Dr Tappa was going to try and get out a call for help! They'd surely be coming if they got his message!"

[The Cornerian Army Does Not Match Any Known Entity. Please Define.]

"They- They're a big military! They fought a war against them, the insurgents! The hostile people inside the stronghold are our enemies!"

[Central Command Requires Confirmation. 8 Cycles Ago Central Command Monitored A Large Scale Conflict In System. All Insurgents Within Stronghold Primea Participated In That Conflict?]

"Yes! They're the bad guys!"

Several new video screens appeared before her, moving the previous screens to her periphery. In front of her were multiple views of numerous warships floating out in space.

[A Fleet Of Unknown Vessels Has Been In Orbit Around Primea For the Last Twelve Hours. Central Command Requires Confirmation. Is Their Designation 'Cornerian Army'?]

Seeing the silver and white ships all lined up in formation filled her heart with hope and joy that could have brought her to tears had she had the eyes to shed them. There were so many of them! Dozens and dozens! It was just like the archival footage she'd seen from the war of the great fleet battles fought between Corneria and the Empire!

"Yes! We're saved! They can come and fight for us!"

Finally, there was something to cheer about as she felt herself smile on the inside as she watched all those ships.

[Gates 03C, 18E, and 47L have been breached.]

"What!"

Oh, no, she'd forgotten! Had it really been two minutes?

“Show me the next gates, please!” She begged, and the video screens all began to shift around to place renewed focus on the teams working to breach the gates. There were now six teams working tirelessly.

[The Next Gates Expected To Be Breached Are 03D, 19E, 26B, and 40K.]

She'd have to watch those gates and not get distracted, but the fleet was just outside in orbit around the planet!

“Has the Army tried to do anything to help us?” She asked.

[The Cornerian Fleet Has Made Periodic Attempts To Breach The Planetary Defense Field Without Success.]

“What is that? What is the planetary defense field?” She asked as she focused her attention on the moving teams of soldiers with their equipment. She wasn't going to let them get any further.

[The Planetary Defense Field Is A Defensive Shield Surrounding Stronghold Primea. It Cannot Be Penetrated By Primitive Technology.]

“Show me.”

A new screen appeared that held the entire planet in focus with a shimmered layer of blue energy seemingly coating its surface. It really was a shield that surrounded all of Sauria!

“So, wait, the Army is outside that? They aren't coming down to help us?”

[Affirmative. The Cornerian Army Is Located Outside The Defense Field's Perimeter.]

“Can't we let them through?”

[Negative. Their Ships Do Not Possess The Phase Key Required.]

“What if we turn off the shield?”

She turned her attention back to the teams of soldiers. More teams were now setting up at their respective gates and she had to look back at the updated list of gates to know which ones to order shut first.

[Disengaging The Planetary Defense Field Has A High Probability Of Provoking Conflict. It Is Not Advised.]

“It's the Cornerian Army! They've got the guns to fight these guys! Look at how many there are!”

[The Cornerian Army Fleet Possesses 49 Warships Of Unidentified Make. The Insurgent Force On Primea Has 81 Warships Of Unidentified Make. The Cornerian Army Is Not Equipped To Repel The Insurgent Force. Their Odds Of Success Are Below 40%.]

Her heart sank. With an army a half size larger than theirs, how could they hope to beat them? One of the teams submitted a forged access code, and she gave the command to deny it. The voice replied, and she waited silently for the next breach attempt so she could deny it, too.

What could she do? What could anyone do?

If she ordered the shield to go down, then a war would start that the Cornerians couldn't win, right? That wouldn't help anyone! They needed a bigger army!

"Does the Stronghold have any weapons?"

[Negative. The Masters Removed Or Disabled All Stronghold Weapons Systems Prior To Departure. Only Defensive Mechanisms Remain.]

"But having a weapon is a defensive mechanism!" She shouted.

[There Are No Weapon Systems On Primea.]

And with that she had no idea what to do. What were her options? She commanded the voice to deny another gate's verification, and it complied. The crews were becoming visibly irritated on screen, which made her feel better, but only a little. Was this all she could do? Stop them from opening doors while a huge fleet of enemy ships sat outside somewhere waiting for their chance to destroy the saviors floating overhead? She had the power to start a war, but it'd be one they'd surely lose.

"Is there anything at all down here we can use?"

[Scans Indicate That One Fighter Craft Matching Cornerian Army Ship Design Landed On Primea Prior To Activation Of The Defense Field.]

Just one?

"Show me."

She felt dejected, disheartened, at a loss as to what to do. Only one space fighter? What could one pilot do against... everything, all of this? She felt like she was suffering from whiplash, hope and depression tugging her roughly back and forth until several of the video screens shifted aside to make room for a new screen. Centered in view was a lone pilot skulking through the darkness, weapon in hand. It looked like he was crawling through rock and debris.

"Who is that?" She asked. The screen began to zoom in on the figure until the 'camera' appeared to be only a few feet away from him before a thin line of white energy passed over the screen. As the line passed by the imagery brightened as if the camera had turned night into day, and she could now see the pilot's face clearly.

[Central Command Has Monitored All Communications On Primea. The Subject In Focus Was Repeatedly Referred To As-]

"Fox McCloud!" She shouted, her heart lifting in her chest as a wellspring of emotion flooded up within her. Her childhood returned to her in a flash, the sight of four men on a brilliant stage, the famed General Pepper awarding each of them the highest medal Corneria could bestow upon a soldier.

Krystal knew this face, had been in Corneria City as the Empire savaged it, and survived to see the news reports. She'd followed the news of the war along with her parents, of their losses, of their victories, and of the infamous Star Fox Team. Of all the people to be here, of ALL the pilots who could stand a chance to do SOMETHING, it was this man!

[Affirmative. Subject's Name Designation Is Fox.]

"Is there a way we can speak to him? To let him know what's going on! We have to warn him!"

[Both Hostile And Allied Organics Are Using Too Primitive Of Communications Technology. Digital Communication Will Be Strained With Any Foreign Vessel Without Significant Adjustments To Their Equipment. Central Command Recommends Direct Link Communication With Subject Fox.]

"Didn't you just say you were monitoring all communications?"

[Central Command's Sensor Array Can Detect And Isolate All Audible Speech On Primea. Use Of Digital Communications Technology Is Not Required.]

"Ok, so what is direct link then? And deny verification on gate 40K!"

[Verification Denied. Direct Link Communication Is The Default Method For Navigators. Interim Navigator Krystal Is Not A Master So Direct Link Will Result In Cognitive Stress If Attempted.]

Cognitive stress? She wasn't sure that she understood what that would mean for her, but what choice did she have if she had to communicate with him?

"How do I do that?"

[Due To Interim Navigator Krystal's Incompatibility The Process Must Be Simplified. Target Has Been Identified. Initiating Link.]

Something hit her, like a smothering weight that compressed her brain until she ached with a powerful migraine. For a moment she couldn't see, but as her vision returned the throbbing in her head grew louder. The screen before her that contained Fox McCloud took over, blocking out everything else until he was all she could see through blurred vision and ringing ears.

[You May Speak Freely.]

She shouted his name.

Chapter 06//PACIFICATION

<< Unknown Location, Planet Sauria >>

[Breaking Link. Current Signal Strength Requires Further Calibration.]

“What did I do!” Krystal panicked as she watched McCloud writhe on the ground, clutching his head in pain. Now distraught, she screamed at the voice to do something, “Make it stop!”

[Signal Strength Is Too High. Recalibrating. Signal Strength Reduced By 75%.]

“Why did it do that? You said this was how I could talk to him!”

[Direct Link Communication Is Designed To Be Used By Masters. Other Organisms Are Not Compatible. Errors Should Be Expected. Signal Strength Now Has Been Reduced. Further Communication Can Be Attempted.]

The voice explained, but she was still angry! She was afraid to talk to him now if that meant he'd be hurt. As she continued to watch the older fox pick himself up off the ground the voice reminded her that several gates were being breached, and she had to order the verification on each of them to be denied.

She watched as McCloud propped himself against a blackened piece of stone, resting himself and looking bewildered as to what had happened, furtively glancing in both directions like he was searching for something.

“I want to try talking to him again, but I don't want to hurt him!”

[Link Reestablished. You May Speak Freely.]

As the voice spoke Krystal felt a wave of something wash over her again, but it wasn't as disorienting as last time. Now it was gentler, and she didn't feel herself coming down with a migraine as she looked at McCloud on the screen.

“Mr. McCloud? Can you hear me?” She asked, hoping she wouldn't have to watch him double over in pain again.

As soon as the words left her, she saw him jump, then hug himself closer to the stone as he looked around himself. She would have been gnawing on her lip with anxiety if she still had lips. It looked like he'd been spooked with how he was cradling his metal spear to his chest defensively.

“Mr. McCloud?” She asked again, unsure if he'd really heard her or if he was reacting to something else around him.

“Who wants to know?” She heard his voice crystal clear in her head even though it was obvious by the video feed that he was whispering. Suddenly, she felt elated! She could talk to him!

“We need your help! They’re trying to break out of the Stronghold, but all I can do is slow them down!”

“You need to keep it down! Where are you, who are you?” He angrily whispered in reply, darting his head in both directions nervously.

“Can anyone else hear me?” She asked the voice.

[Only Target Fox McCloud Can Hear Your Communications, Interim Navigator Krystal. Request Target To Maintain His Own Silence.]

“No, no one can hear me but you! You can whisper and I’ll still hear you!”

“And who are you?” He asked, bewildered.

“My name is Krystal, I came here with my parents to help at Intrepid Station. We were all captured by them- by the Empire!”

“Krystal? You’re the missing girl then, but how are you talking to me without a radio?”

Missing girl? Did he already rescue her parents, everyone else!

“Oh! You must have found my parents, oh thank you, thank you!” She felt so much joy. Finally, a piece of good news after all she’d been through.

“Wait, hold on, you need to answer my questions! I’m in the middle of a crater and I’ve got a teenage girl talking to me like she’s a ghost!”

Krystal wavered, but what could she say that didn’t sound crazy? She was captured by the Empire, tortured by them, then forced naked into a machine thing that transported her to a weird blue void where an ancient alien AI talks to her with a disembodied voice. Well, at least the first two or three parts sounded believable.

“I escaped our camp with Dr Tappa, then we separated so he could escape and call for help while I distracted them. They caught me and caged us up. Somewhere really cold, then they took me back to the Stronghold to ask me where Dr Tappa went!”

“Wait, Tappa didn’t mention he was with you.”

“You’ve met him!”

“Yeah, he’s with the EarthWalkers. He sent out the distress signal that got all this started. It’s why we’re here.”

Krystal was overjoyed that he made it! Everything she’d gone through to get a call out for help hadn’t been in vain, she so badly wanted to cry.

“I’m so glad, Mr. McCloud! Is he safe?”

“Yeah, he’s safe in their village. Where are you? What is the ‘stronghold’ they took you to? Are you still there?”

"I don't know if I'm still there, but the stronghold is what..." she had to think. Did 'it' have a name? Central Command?

"The stronghold is what 'it' calls the Krazoa ruins, we called it the Graveyard. I don't know where you're at, Mr. McCloud, but it's where we were doing our excavations." She explained.

"That's where I'm at right now." He whispered in reply. Krystal was confused, since he was crouched low in a big smokey crater. She had no idea where a place like that would be, but it certainly wasn't the Graveyard.

[Target Fox McCloud Is Located 532 Feet Outside Stronghold Primea's West Access Gate.] The voice confirmed to her.

"Why is everything messed up? Where are the statues?"

"My best guess is that our Imperial friends tried to shoot their way into the Force Point Temple. There's nothing left out here that looks like an archeological dig. I'm sorry."

[7 Hours And 22 Minutes Ago An External Breach Attempt Was Detected. No Damage To Stronghold Primea Was Detected, So Central Command Did Not Provide A Report.]

"I would have liked to have known that!" She replied angrily.

"I didn't have a way to tell you?" The older fox replied, confused.

"No, not you! The voice! The stronghold's computer is talking to me!"

"Wait, no, explain that. Who is talking to you? What is the stronghold?"

"This! This place, the Force Point Temple, the Graveyard. It calls it Stronghold Primea. I think the Krazoa called Sauria Primea when they lived here. It's like a big military base underground and there are Imperial soldiers all in it!"

Two screens to her left began to attract her attention, and she had to deny verification on one gate, but missed the second. She was being too distracted by her conversation!

"I'm trying to keep them from opening more gates, but it's hard. They're trying to get out!"

"Ok, ok, so they're inside the Temple. Are you with them, are you safe?"

"I... I don't know where I'm at. I was with them and now I'm somewhere else. I'm like, I don't know how to explain it, it's like I'm here but I'm not. They shoved me into something and turned it on and now I'm like this."

[Interim Navigator Krystal's Physical Body Is Located Within Central Command's Interface Chamber. There Are Twelve Imperial Insurgents Within The Chamber, But Your Body Is Secure.]

"It says I'm in a central command chamber, and that there are twelve soldiers here with me, but my body is safe. I think I'm inside something."

“Ok.” McCloud replied. She watched him rub the spot above his muzzle and between his eyes. “Start from the beginning and tell me exactly what’s going on, please.”

<< Force Point Temple, Planet Sauria >>

“That’s all they have to report for now, Sir.”

The Admiral nodded to the Lieutenant. About an hour ago their forward progress had been stalled. They’d been making swift progress reopening many of the doors that had been sealed shut, but all of a sudden, they were hitting intermittent roadblocks. Doors would shut themselves back, or the opening would be canceled partway, and they’d have to try again.

According to the report, the science teams and technicians couldn’t discern why this was happening now. Their progress hadn’t been brought to a near standstill, but his teams had to hurl themselves at the problem repeatedly until finally they could break through, causing frustration and a blow to their morale.

“Have nonessential personnel move themselves towards the entrance. Should we get a chance to escape we should be ready to take it. Continue rationing our supplies evenly throughout.” Scales commanded stoically. He continued to remain at his post as Fleet Admiral and would remain within the facility until a route for evac had been assured. Slow though the process might be now, they were still making some headway.

“Sir! Will there be anything else?”

“No, dismissed, Kanis.”

His Lieutenant snapped a salute and returned to his own post to carry out his orders.

This new turn of events felt erratic, uncoordinated. The report didn’t specify if there was any sort of pattern in how their efforts were failing. The Krazoa were very advanced, and he did not believe that this could be so casually dismissed as a system’s failure or a glitch. Emperor Andross thought highly of the technology that would be found here, and the Admiral was willing to trust the Emperor’s judgement on the matter.

If the Temple’s programming was not to blame for these failures, then what was? His teams were not incompetent, so that was out of the question. It was something else.

He just didn’t know what.

Scales turned his gaze to the large crystalline object that floated in the center of the chamber, and the body that was just barely visible as a silhouette within it. He searched the blue surface for any sign of his missing hand but found none. If they were to find a way to deactivate the crystal, he wondered if his hand would come falling out of it, and could it be returned to him, sparing him a life with a cold prosthetic?

“Sir!” Lieutenant Kanis returned to him in a hurry.

“Yes?”

“We’ve just received a report from one of our recon teams deeper in the facility. They’ve just opened another door and found a storage room on the other side. They think they’ve found what the Emperor was looking for!” He replied with excitement.

Scales turned his full attention to the coyote, his gaze almost like a glare that withered his subordinate’s excitement.

“Are they certain of this?” He asked, his own excitement being held back through sheer force of will. He would not let his emotions carry himself away with so much at stake.

“They’re reporting that they match the schematics drawn up by the Emperor, almost identically, Sir. The Emperor was right!” The Lieutenant replied, sober now under the Admiral’s gaze.

After a moment, Scales finally permitted himself to smile.

The girl explained everything as best as she could with Fox stopping her to pull more details from her every step of the way. There were necessary pauses in her story as she’d stop to ‘keep the gates closed’. He didn’t understand what that all meant until after she’d finished explaining herself. The amount of new intel he had to digest wasn’t what he had expected, but neither was it unwelcome.

Now Fox knew he had someone on the inside that had some pull.

“So, to make sure that we’re clear. There are at least 81 Imperial warships somewhere on the planet?”

“Yes, that’s what the voice says.” The teenager replied in his head by some method Fox didn’t want to ask about.

“Can the voice give an estimate for how many troops they have on planet? How many soldiers.” Fox asked, then scanned his surroundings again. Enough time had passed now for the crashed shuttle to have been swarmed with Imperials, the pilot recovered, and no doubt they were trying to revive him. He didn’t know how much time he’d have before it was revealed that the shuttle had been hijacked.

“It says there’d about 3,200 hostiles on the planet. Is that a lot?”

It’s a hell of a lot for one stranded pilot to deal with. Most of those would be on their warships serving as crew. If they pulled together this many ships across eight years, then it wasn’t to wage a ground invasion. The troops he’d seen so far are the specialists they needed to take the research station and to investigate the ruins. Fox was ready to assume the Empire was

probably aware of the Cornerian military overhead and ready for combat as soon as the shield drops, if it dropped.

"I need to call this into the Great Fox. Let everyone know what they're up against."

"Oh, ok."

"Keep working on the gates for now." He told her, then ducked low and crept away from his hiding spot to find a new one amidst the rubble and debris. He felt uncomfortable staying in one place for so long when so many watching eyes were around. Once he was in a new location he hunkered back down and radioed The Great Fox to tell them what he knew, skipping over some of the more difficult to explain details involving alien AI and teenage girls.

"There's no way!" Fox could hear Falco shouting from the background after the team had been told how many warships were hiding on Sauria.

"There was a way, and they clearly found it. Have the Cornerians call for reinforcements while they still can."

"And you're certain of this, Fox?" It was Slippy asking nervously.

"My source is reliable and is currently hiding amongst their troops. She's one of the researchers that went missing. You need to convince the Cornerians to pull everything they have to spare to Sauria if they want this to end well."

"I don't think it'll take much convincing, but they won't be expecting a request for another fleet." Replied the hare.

"I know, but they'll just have to deal with it the same as we are. I know you're already coordinating with them up there, but now you're outnumbered. Prepare for that." Fox said with a sigh.

"Roger that, Fox. Thanks for the update. Is there a timeframe for when the shields might go down?" Peppy asked.

"No, I have no idea. That's the next hurdle I have to solve." Fox lied. He chose to omit the fact that the flashpoint of war was in control of a teenage girl.

"But that's got me thinking. If that shield does go down, I'm going to need a way off this planet. Did that Dr Adger fix my Arwing?" Fox added, Slippy took a turn to speak.

"I've been working with him by radio for the last several hours. He's got the engine repaired, but your G-Diffuser is still busted. He doesn't have all the tools and parts he needs, and I can only do so much from here by radio. He promised to keep tinkering with it, but I'm not going to promise you it'll work, Fox."

"But it can fly?" He asked.

"Yeah, should fly just fine according to him."

"Then that's what I needed to know, and I'll deal with the G-Diffuser when the time comes."

He stopped to think. If his Arwing could fly again, then he knew he had an exit strategy for when things got bad. The girl had the power to shut the field down from her position, but they were all outgunned. It'd be better to keep the shields up for now and then when reinforcements arrived, they could be dropped. If they could turn this around and outnumber the Empire when the fighting starts, then Corneria holding dominance in orbit would be to their advantage.

But how would he go about getting the girl out of there and to safety with all these Imperials around? He'd have to do that at the same time she brings the shields down, he figured.

"Mr. McCloud?" The girl's voice suddenly rang in his head, spooking him for the moment.

"I need to go silent, Out." Fox said, then keyed his radio off so they wouldn't think he was going crazy by talking to himself.

"Yes? And don't call me 'Mr.', you can just call me Fox."

"Oh, ok, um, Fox, the voice is telling me that the insurgents have just stolen several 'kinetic batteries' from their storage racks."

"And what are those?"

"I, I don't know, but the voice is acting like that's really really bad. I'm trying to keep the gates shut, but they've got more people working to open them now, and they're making it harder for me to keep them shut!"

A tall reptile watched as his men worked. Sergeant Mire's team had been trying to open this same door for nearly a quarter of an hour with every attempt ending in failure. There were other teams elsewhere in the facility working to breach their own doors, and they were encountering the same problems. Something was causing their forged credentials to fail, but every now and then the Sergeant would hear a team cheer over the radio that they'd opened a door. They now had nine teams working at breaching doors with the science team busy training even more. They currently had 33 doors opened, but they were still trapped inside the facility with much of their forces isolated from one another.

When they'd first entered the facility, they'd been ordered to carefully map out every corridor and room they accessed, so they were fortunate now to have an accurate map as a guide that they could also use to identify all opened and sealed doorways. Little by little, they were making progress at moving men and supplies around the facility and closer towards the exit.

Per the Admiral's orders they were to secure an evac strategy for all troops sealed inside the facility, but with the caveat that their highest priority should be given to the recon team in the storage chamber. The room that recon had uncovered was filled with something the Admiral wanted, though the Sergeant didn't know anything more about it aside from them being called 'batteries'. Alien tech, which didn't surprise him. Everything in this place was alien.

So far, it was proving to be difficult to secure a route from the front entrance to the storage room, and once doors started closing back on their own, they had to start propping equipment underneath every door they opened now. They were using anything that'd strong enough to keep it from being shut again that was also expendable.

Some doors that closed on them were being kept open with about three feet of clearance, since that was the height of a rifle box standing on its end. The solid steel construction of the box was enough to resist the PSI of the alien doors. The recon team had managed to wedge their doorways open wider, since the storage racks they'd found could be disassembled. The racks were honeycomb in design and had long metal plates making up the side walls of the honeycombs, which were made of the same strange metal the rest of the facility was built of.

Despite being only a half inch thick the plates could hold open a door just fine and gave everyone a four-foot clearance for passage. Recon had already reported that they'd secured six of the batteries the Admiral wanted and had managed to move them out of the storage room and down two corridors before being stopped by another sealed doorway.

"Woo!" Private Howler shouted from the door as it hissed and slid upward. Another soldier immediately sacrificed a rifle box by wedging it inside the gap the doorway had left in the doorframe. If it decided to randomly shut itself like many other doors had tried to in the last hour, it would hit the rifle box instead.

"Door 30 is breached and secured. Over." Sergeant Mire keyed his radio and reported the news to HQ, then waited for a response. HQ was still located in the central chamber with the Admiral, and they were coordinating the operation from there.

"Roger that, Sergeant. Now proceed to door 29 for breach. You'll be linking up Squads 04 and 11 past that doorway." Came the reply.

"Affirmative, moving out. Over."

The Sergeant ordered his team to break down their gear and begin moving it to the next doorway. Little by little they were linking their forces together.

<< Unknown Location, Planet Sauria >>

They were opening even more doors now and wedging them open! Krystal was beginning to panic. Before her on one of her screens was a growing list of gates that were suffering breach attempts, and behind that was another screen with a list of every gate that had been opened.

“How are they doing this so fast!”

[Their Operating Procedure Is Becoming More Efficient With Practice, Interim Navigator.]

“Then what am I supposed to do? I keep stopping them, but they keep trying! I don’t know how to do this any faster, they’re going to get through!”

[Several Kinetic Cells Have Been Stolen From Their Holding Racks. Protocol Recommends A Focus On All Exit Gates. Disregarding Interior Gates Will Allow You To Maintain Lockdown On Entrance Gate 03 Indefinitely.]

“Wait, you mean forever? I’m supposed to just cancel the door from being opened forever!”

She would have slapped her palms to her cheeks to rub at herself in frustration had she the hands to do it. The teams of soldiers had her way outnumbered and they were gaining ground little by little with every mistake she made, and they weren’t opening the doors on a schedule. Every time a team reached a door, they immediately set to work to open it, relentlessly, with every team working to their own timetable. This meant that for every two minutes of Krystal’s time she had over a dozen doors to monitor, canceling the verification for the first one to be breached, then shifting to the next, then the next, all as fast as she could to give her verbal command.

Sometimes she just wasn’t fast enough to get to each Gate in time.

[Scans Of Insurgents Indicate An Estimated Lifespan Of Six Weeks With Their Current Supplies.]

“So, I have to wait until they all starve to death!” She shouted. “And what about me!”

[Stasis Slows, But Does Not Halt, Biological Processes. Estimated Lifespan For Interim Navigator Krystal Is Three Weeks Given Your Present Physical Condition.]

She wasn’t just stressing out; she was going into a full-blown panic with her losing track of Gate list as she struggled to process what she was supposed to do next. She’d die before they would, and if that happened, even if she kept the front door closed until she croaked, they’d just opened it after she died. She was going to die!

She wanted to cry so badly, but couldn’t, she was going to die here!

[Gate 14L Has Been Breached.]

Krystal heard it but didn’t make any move to deal with it. She was frozen in place with the thought of her slowly starving to death in this empty void consuming her heart and soul. She was all alone here and couldn’t do anything but die.

[Gate 23T Has Been Breached. Interim Navigator Krystal, Please Continue Containment Efforts.]

“I don’t know what to do.” She whispered.

[Current Containment Efforts Must Be Continued. Theft Of Kinetic Cells Must Be Prevented.]

“I don’t even know what those are! Why should I care when I’m just going to die in three weeks, and they’ll all get out anyway!”

She was shouting, angry and hurting, with all the hope she had from before having been snuffed out. She’d been so sure that there had been a way to fight back, to do something, but now she only had a slow death to wait for.

[Kinetic Cells Are Free Energy Generators. With Minimum Input Of Energy, A Maximum Output of Energy Results. The Theft Of All Kinetic Cells Must Be Prevented.]

“Then tell me how I’m supposed to do that!”

She was too angry to think straight, hardly listening to the voice as it urged her to fight the futile battle against the Empire. What did it matter! She could fight them at these stupid gates for every moment of every hour and all that’d do is leave her dead in three weeks with a bunch of hungry soldiers storming out of the front door killing everyone she knew, starting with... Mr. McCloud!

“I want to talk to Mr.- Fox. I want to talk to Fox McCloud!”

[Containment Efforts Must-]

“I Will Talk To Fox McCloud!” She shouted at the voice, and the view screens in front of her shifted until the video feed of Fox came to the fore. He was still waiting in his hidey hole as the night grew darker, waiting for something to change.

[Link Established.]

“Fox, I don’t know what to do!” She shouted, startling the pilot.

“What’s wrong? Has something happened?”

“I’m going to die! I can’t keep all the gates shut, and the voice is telling me I’ll be dead in three weeks, but the soldiers have supplies to last them six! I’m going to starve to death and then they’ll open all the doors!”

She sounded hysterical now, telling it to someone that actually cared was breaking the dam within her that was holding back much of her emotions.

“You have to help me, please!” She pleaded.

The man in the video looked confused and distressed and there was a long pause of silence between them as the older fox strained himself with thought.

“If we let them break free on purpose, I can sneak in and get you out.” He suggested.

[Theft Of Kinetic Cells Must Be Prevented.] The voice interrupted her thoughts.

“It keeps telling me I can’t let them steal the kinetic cells! That’s all it cares about now!”

Fox looked confused, and asked her what those were, which prompted the voice to repeat its earlier description of the cells.

“It says they’re ‘free energy power generators.’” She told him, and both his ears flicked down them up again in consternation.

“Free energy? That’s not possible. That’s what it called them?”

“Yes!”

[Free Energy Was Perfected By The Masters In Krazoa Year 4521.]

“The voice just said the Krozoa perfected it in 4521. I don’t know when that was, it’s just what the voice said.”

Fox was looking more distressed.

“That’s not good.” He finally replied.

“Why?”

“Most modern weapons systems use energy, so if the Empire has access to free energy, then they can fight a really effective war.” He explained, and her heart sank, her anger and pain falling mute in the face of what would be the worst thing to happen to the Lylat System since the Lylat War. Everything was falling apart around her.

“Krystal, I want you to ask the voice what the Krazoa would do in the event an enemy force was to occupy one of their military bases.”

She didn’t need to ask the voice, since it was already listening and prepared to give an answer.

[In The Event That A Hostile Force Overruns A Stronghold’s Defenses, And There Is No Means Of Reversing The Offensive, Then The Acting Navigator Must Have Central Command Initiate A Self Destruct.]

She didn’t know if she wanted to tell Fox that. She’d have to tell the voice to blow up the whole place, and what else would that destroy! How big of an explosion!

“Krystal?” He asked her, but she hesitated.

[Interim Navigator Krystal, Central Command Cannot Directly Communicate With Subjects Outside Stasis.] Implying that she would have to be the one to tell him.

“It says you’re supposed to blow up the stronghold. A self-destruct.”

“What kind of self-destruct? What’s the radius of the explosion?”

[The Stronghold Self Destruct Sequence Relies Upon An Implosion Ten Miles Beneath Primea’s Surface. All Stronghold Facilities Will Be Drawn Into The Implosion And Destroyed. Estimated Radius Of Damage Is Ten Miles.]

She repeated a truncated version of that to Fox, who seemed to furl his brow, and began to thumb the headset he wore.

“I need a way to get inside, get to you, and then back out. If I break you out of there, we can let the AI blow the whole thing up and the generators with it.”

“How do we get him inside to rescue me?” She asked the voice.

There was a moment’s pause.

[Should Stronghold Primea Self Destruct The Planetary Defense Field Will Deactivate.] The voice informed her, reminding her that open conflict would break out as soon as the barrier keeping the two factions apart disappeared.

“It says if we blow it up the shield around Sauria will turn off. Is that ok?”

“I can radio everyone overhead, so they’ll know what’s coming. That’s the best we can do if we want to stop them from having any time putting those generators to use.”

She again asked the voice if there was a way to help Fox to get inside to save her.

[The Odds Of Defeating The Insurgent Force Are Still Low, Interim Navigator. Should The Insurgent Force Utilize Any Kinetic Cells The Odds Of Victory Will Shrink Further.]

Krystal grew angry again and shouted at the voice to tell her how Fox could get inside the stronghold. There was a long pause.

[All Navigators Possess A Means To Neutralize Threats That Reside With A Stronghold. Interim Navigator Krystal Is Not A Master, So This Option Was No Presented Due To Biological Incompatibilities. To Attempt A Psionic Purge Would Incur Great Risk To Yourself, Interim Navigator.]

Again, the voice was telling her things she didn’t fully understand. Was it trying to talk her out of it?

“Are you telling me I can’t do it? Whatever it is?”

[It Can Be Attempted If You Command It, Interim Navigator. At Great Risk To Yourself.]

“What kind of risk?”

[You Must Be Made Compatible To Attempt A Psionic Purge. You May Not Survive The Effort, Interim Navigator.]

Well, she was going to die anyway, wasn’t she? What sort of choices were these! The voice read off another gate being opened, and she knew there were many more to come after that. Thinking back to her original option, a lonely death as her body slowly dies here in this empty place. She wanted to inhale nice and big, so she could feel like she was preparing herself, like just before a big race.

But she couldn't, not here, not without a body. The only way she'd get to experience having a body again was if she escaped, if Mr. McCloud could save her, and the only way that was happening is if she took the risk and did what she needed to do. To do a 'psionic purge', whatever that was. She could do it, and she would do it.

"Mr. McCloud..." she told the man, pausing for a moment to steel herself before continuing. "I'm going to try to find you a way in. Just wait!"

When she said her piece, she told the voice to do it, whatever it was, so that she could do the purge.

[Are You Certain, Interim Navigator?]

"Yes! Do it! Show me how to do it!" She shouted, forcing herself to be strong.

[Affirmative.]

With that last word spoken the world around her went black in an instant, all the viewscreens vanished into the void leaving her floating in the dark like she had been in the very beginning. As the darkness consumed her, she felt a ringing in her ear, followed then by great pain as her head was compressed from all sides, the pressure forcing a scream out of her as her skull seemed to shudder and creak under great force.

For the first time in many hours, she could feel her body again, her skull screaming as loud as she was all while something terrifying happened to her. From her skull she felt a fire spread, like she'd been lit aflame with the embers catching and spreading across her by igniting the fur of her body, her broken ribs crying out in agony, her bruises and cuts shrieking as if doused with salt and lye.

The pressure in her skull reversed, and her body vanished again, the void around her shifting now in color. From black it switched to blue, then to green, to yellow, to red, rotating rapidly, faster, and faster through every color, every hue in the universe until they blended together in an infinite blur of the purest white light she'd ever seen. It blinded her, the pressure pushing outward in her head causing her to scream again as the light pierced through to her very soul.

Color returned, a blurred mass of colors like wet oil on a canvas, the pain was terrible, she wanted to cry, to scream, to beg the voice to stop, but she was left mute in what felt like her last moments as the world around her kept moving and shifting chaotically from color to color until at last things began to slow.

The void maintained its mixture of colors, but shapes began to emerge from them little by little, like a camera lens being twisted into focus. As the world became clearer to her the more confusing it became. She could see hallways, rooms, control panels, floors, ceilings, gates, men in uniforms, rifles, white lab coats, all at once and separately like her eyes had become that of an insect, a compounding of lenses taking in the world around her in a single instance. And there was talking, talking, talking! Such a chorus of gibberish like a roaring stadium filled her ears with such volume it rivaled the pain that continued to echo through her head. She couldn't shut them out!

[Compatibility Adjustment Complete, Interim Navigator. Please, Direct Your Attention To All Hostile Organics To Begin The Psionic Purge.]

The hostile organics? The Empire. She needed to do the purge! Where were they? As she thought the words, the roaring of voices in her ear grew louder until all she could see in the void was a mass of bodies, like she was peering into a kaleidoscope of flesh. More than a hundred voices were all shouting in her ear, but she could see them! Each one moving within the kaleidoscope, their voice a blur in her ear, but still there like individual instruments in an orchestra of souls.

[You Have Targeted 136 Hostiles Within Range For A Psionic Purge, Interim Navigator.]

“D-do it.” She choked out, struggling to form her own words as the weight of so many voices threatened to drown out her own thoughts.

[Central Command Cannot Execute A Psionic Purge. Speak The Command Yourself, Interim Navigator. Gate 28C Has Been Breached.]

She looked deep into the swirling mass of bodies, listened to their cacophony of voices, and gave the command herself, and for the first time she spoke the Master’s tongue, something she did not she could do.

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<< Force Point Temple, Planet Sauria >>

Over the radio came more cheers that another door had been opened. Sergeant Mire’s team, and apparently every other team, were suddenly experiencing a breakthrough with not a single attempt to open a door failing. As much of a relief as this was, it made him feel a little uneasy. They’d been having so much trouble getting a single door open, then about ten minutes ago they suddenly had no issue. His own team was now working at their third door with several other teams all experiencing the same sudden lack of resistance.

Their map was rapidly coming together with corridors being linked up and a true path to freedom being laid out. At this new pace they might have everything open in half an hour, maybe less.

“We’re hooked up, plugging in the code now.” The Private said from his kneeling position by the door, their makeshift electric equipment spliced into the access panel in the floor.

“Good, get her open.” Mire replied, noticing he was developing a headache but dismissing it in the same instance as nothing more than a nuisance.

“Roger that, the code is in, and now we wait.” The Private replied, then looked over his shoulder for approval from his superior, the young ape furling his brow at the sight of his Sergeant.

“Uh, Sir, you got a nosebleed.” He then said, prompting Mire to lift his hand to his nose, feeling something slick through the leather of his gloves before looking down at the red stain on his fingers.

“Well, shit.” He said to that, feeling his headache getting even stronger, strong enough to make his eyes hurt like a bad migraine. Another member of his team collapsed to the floor behind him, Mire’s own balance beginning to fail as the pain in his head continued to swell as the young man by the door suddenly cried out in pain, the Sergeant seeing blood beginning to drip freely from the younger man’s nose, his eyes going bloodshot before he collapsed to the floor.

With his own vision going red the Sergeant tried to go for his radio, but lost consciousness before he could reach it.

In the central chamber Lieutenant Kanis was fighting his own headache as his communications tech began to complain of one himself, noting that he’d just lost contact with Squad 08 mid conversation.

“Admiral! Something is happening!” He shouted; his voice thick with alarm.

Admiral Scales picked himself up from his chair, lifting a hand to his head and noticing that the vision in his right eye had begun to go pink, blood now dripping from his nose. A powerful migraine then gripped him tight, the reptile looking around at his officers and saw they were all now suffering their own nose bleeds.

“Get medical here, now!” He shouted, only realizing after giving the order that his medical staff might be similarly affected, then a soldier by the door dropped to the floor limp, followed by the communications tech, the reptile’s body slumping over the controls before sliding to the floor.

The Lieutenant tried to grab the tech’s headset but stumbled to the side and collapsed in a heap next to him. Furious now, the Admiral took a step towards communications, but felt his balance begin to fail him as the world began to spin as he collapsed to the floor to join the ranks of his men, everything going dark in an instant.

Chapter 07//OBLIVION

<< Force Point Temple, Planet Sauria >>

Several minutes had passed since the girl had told Fox to wait, and it was starting to make him anxious. He had no way of knowing when or if the patrols would start tightening up around him, since he couldn't get past the idea that someone would have figured out the shuttle crash hadn't been an accident. He breathed out a quiet sigh, checking over his shoulder and panning his eyes across the charred ruins around him. He couldn't smell it anymore now, the burnt smell of the cooked soil.

From his vantage point he could count... There were supposed to be four guards. Two were by the door and two more were meandering around a few hundred meters back behind him. As he wondered where they went, he felt a headache coming on, but he ignored it. He had plenty of other more important things to worry about than his own bumps and bruises, which were plenty. He really needed to figure out where those soldiers went if he was to maintain his cover. Last thing he needed was to get startled from behind by the barrel of a gun pointed at him, the thought of which prompted him to carefully turn and survey the area behind him. There wasn't a soul visible.

He adjusted his grip on the metal staff, wishing in that moment that it wasn't so big and cumbersome. If it could only just retract- and the entire length of the staff suddenly snapped short, Fox let it drop to the ground in a moment of fright. He stared down at the object, seeing it had returned to its original size and shape before reaching down to touch it.

"That was weird and convenient." Whispering.

Grasping it around the middle he wondered what made it do that all of a sudden, feeling the object with his fingers and studying it with his eyes to see if he'd somehow missed a button or a switch on its body. Could he have accidentally hit the trigger to make it retract, and if so, how would he go about extending it again like it had in the shuttle? Thinking more on it, it'd had been very convenient there, too, what with how this artifact seemed to do what it needed to do right when it was needed. Even if by accident.

With no visible interface on the item, he was at a loss. Fox knew he could figure it out if it would only extend for him one mo- and the object shot out in both directions, snapping to its full length with Fox keeping a better grip on it this time. The kinetic force of the extension was difficult to control, the staff wanting to leap from his hand. With a tight grip he squeezed the handle, and nothing happened.

"Shrink." He whispered, and the staff popped back into its retracted state, his eyes widening at the stupid simplicity of it.

"Uh huh."

He didn't say anything the other times though, and so he just thought about it extending, and it did exactly that.

“Well, you suddenly got a whole lot more useful.” He said to himself, noting that even if he didn’t know how to fight with a staff or a spear, he could always just point it at someone and make it extend, since that alone was enough to knock out a grown man.

Fox shrunk the staff back down and crawled out from his hiding place, reaching up to rub at the pain between his eyes before emerging into a crouched position. If he could get closer to that door, he could figure out what happened to the guards that were posted there, and his headache seemed to be getting worse.

Creeping his way towards the door, he kept his profile as low as possible while keeping his head on a swivel. There was no one in view, which only grew the feeling of unease that sat in his belly. The closer he got to the door the tighter his head became to feel until he finally had to stop and blink his eyes, hands coming back up again to rub between his eyes. What a time to be getting a migraine of all things.

He pressed himself up against a chest high piece of rubble, peeked around and saw he had a clear stretch of charred earth before reaching another section of rubble. He could make that, he thought, blinking away the discomfort before ducking low and zipping across to the next piece of debris. He was a dozen or so meters from where the soldiers had been patrolling in front of the gate.

With a deep breath he peeked, saw nothing, and then slowly crawled out from behind his cover and made his approach. He reached the debris, a pile of blackened rock, then ducked so low he was on his hands and knees, crawling forward until he could just begin to peek again over the rocks and into the clearing beyond. Before the door was a patch of earth flattened and smooth with two bodies slumped together in a heap under the floodlights.

Sensing alarm, he checked all around himself, saw no one, then crawled over the rock pile and into the clearing. The bodies were lying as if they’d collapsed quickly, but with no apparent cause. Fox shook his head, pushing aside his now waning headache. He came to the first body, a canine whose face was turned away from him. He checked for a pulse, found none, then gently took the young man by the chin and turned his head.

“Shit.”

He let go of his chin and let the head droop back to the ground. Both his eyes were bloodshot, full red within red, with blood running from the man’s nose. More blood was leaking out from around his helmet. He crawled around the corpse and checked the second body, and with his head clearing up all of a sudden, he was able to pay more attention to this one.

Same bloodshot eyes, nosebleed, no blood from the helmet though. And there was a pulse, but the ape was out cold. Looking back at the other body he had to consider if they’d been shot, but by who and by what? There were no bullet holes from a ballistic weapon, nor were there any energy burns.

What could drop a man dead or near dead like this? He gritted his teeth, thinking now that the girl had told him she was going to try something.

“Krystal?” He whispered, hoping for a reply.

When nothing happened, he asked her name again, then waited. Minutes were passing, and the longer he waited the more oppressive the air around him felt. He was feeling uneasy and the deathly silence that settled over the ruined earth that was giving him the spooks.

“Krystal, I need you to answer me.”

“I’m sorry!” the girl’s voice shouted in a sob, Fox’s ears folding back instinctively as her voice rang loud in his head. Any attempt to cover them did nothing to drop her volume.

“Too loud!” He winced.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean it!” She was sobbing in his head, her volume somehow dropping like a dial had been turned as she spoke. The girl sounded like a mess, blubbing a constant apology.

“Krystal! You need to calm down, you need to tell me what’s happened!” He replied, keeping his voice firm but at a low enough volume as to not be too easy to overhear. His eyes darted around him, cutting the best they could through the still air and into the darkness beyond. Distant spotlights showed no signs of movement of Imperial soldiers.

“It didn’t tell me what it did! I just did what it told me to do!”

“Krystal! Are you safe?” Changing tactics, focusing on her.

“I’m sorry!”

“Are. You. Safe!”

“Yes.” Her distress was through the roof and it was difficult to understand her half the time, but something had clearly just happened that sent her over the edge.

“I need you to tell me what’s hap-“

“I didn’t mean to kill them, I didn’t!” She sobbed harder. He looked down at the bodies next to him, the one unconscious and the one that was clearly dead.

She did this?

“Ok, listen, you have to listen! Is it safe for me to come inside? Can I come in to get you?”

There was a moment of silence from her, the stillness enveloping him once again. Looking again at the two bodies he felt a chill run down his spine. If she was inside, how did she manage to do this to two grown men? What the hell does that to a body?

The giant door began to move. The vertical seam in the center parted, the halves of the doorway separating, air hissed as it rushed from one side of the doorway to the other as the pressure equalized. Fox immediately stood up and hurried to the door, squeezing himself between the widening gap and into the buried facility.

“I’m inside, you need to tell me where to go.”

The doors kept opening wider behind him, and ahead of him was a long corridor littered with cargo crates and stray equipment, but no people. He started jogging down the hallway until he hit a tee junction, then waited for directions.

“Krystal? Please, you need to help me get to you!”

“Turn right.” She said after a moment, her voice still distraught.

Going right he followed the corridor until he found an open doorway with equipment plugged into the floor and crumpled bodies. He counted four of them and they all had the same bloodshot eyes and nosebleeds as the men outside. Fox didn’t stop to check for any pulses.

He approached another tee junction and the girl told him to turn left. Her voice sounded empty and defeated now. She continued to give him directions and the deeper he went into the Temple the more the bodies began to pile high. Five minutes in and he’d counted over fifty bodies, all on the floor with blood coming from their faces.

“Go straight here, then turn left at the next intersection.”

Fox was sprinting now, wanting to get to her as fast as possible so they could both get out of here. The Academy didn’t prepare its pilots to see this many bodies lying on the ground! He didn’t envy what the infantry would have seen back during the war.

He turned left and kept running until he reached a large circular room. A dozen or so bodies were strewn about the floor with a large blue object hovering in the center.

“Dead end. Where are you?” He asked, looking around the room, recounting the bodies to find exactly twelve were in a collapsed and bloodied state.

“I’m in the middle.” She said, directing Fox towards the object.

It was much larger than a person, and crystalline in structure. Stepping over the large body of a reptile he approached the blue stone. It looked solid and smooth like glass, with him touching it with his hand to confirm. It felt cool to the touch and felt like it was quietly humming with life. It was the biggest crystal he’d even seen, like a huge version of the kind that formed in rivers back on Papatoon. Just this one was blue instead of yellow or amber.

“Is this...” He started, staring into the crystal until he jerked his hand away. Deep within the object was a faint silhouette of a person. “No way.”

“I think I’m inside that thing, that’s what it tells me.”

He had to ignore the cosmic humor of a girl like her being stuck in a thing like this.

“Is there a way to get you out?” He asked.

[Fox McCloud Is In Possession Of A Command Staff.]

“I don’t know what that is.” Krystal replied. She was depressed, her heart empty. She had no idea what she was doing, what she had done!

She’d killed so many people, she wanted to scream! It didn’t tell her she was going to kill them! She- she didn’t know what it meant! Once she got started it was like something was happening on its own, and she didn’t know how to stop it until it was done. She was so exhausted, her head hurt so badly, and all she could do now was keep talking to herself in her head so she could push everything else out, all the awful thoughts and feelings.

Fox’s thoughts were in her head, too, loud like he was speaking in her ear, and he was upset and afraid. He’d seen what she did! There were so many people, she didn’t mean to do it, even if they were bad people this isn’t what she thought would happen. She wanted to believe she had been doing something else... anything but just killing!

[A Command Staff Is A Weapon System and Interface Device Awarded To Masters Of Koul Rank And Higher. This Command Staff Has A Blank Identification And Has Not Been Formally Bonded To A Master. Its Clearance Level Is Zero.]

“Why is this important?”

[It Can Be Used To Free You Once The Self-Destruct Sequence Has Been Initiated.]

“Ok.”

We’re more people going to die when she blew up the Stronghold? She felt so empty inside now, but what else could she do? Fox was already here and waiting on her, and she’d already hurt so many other people. What were a few more when she set the sequence?

“How do I initiate the self-destruct sequence?”

[Central Command Is Not Permitted To Directly Inform A Navigator Of The Method.] The voice replied.

It was then that a view screen appeared before her with a string of foreign text, all of it Krazoan. Somehow, she could read it, and understood their meaning. The voice was showing her an excerpt from a database of information now, explaining what to do if the Krazoa suffered a serious military defeat that was going to cost them a Stronghold or other installation.

It was strange seeing how easy it was to blow up a military base if you were a Navigator. All it would take was a single spoken sentence, then set the timer. What sort of training did they put Navigators through for them to be trusted with this much power? Even without blowing the place up they’d have control over the planet’s energy shield, all their weapons, and even the ability to kill with just a thought.

She once believed the Krazoa to be this mysterious dead race of beings full of wonder, but now she was terrified of what they were. She was glad they were dead.

“Ok, I know how now.”

[After You Set The Sequence, Please Have Fox McCloud Insert The Command Staff Into The Central Command Interface Port. It Is Located Directly Forward Of The Stasis Chamber Near His Feet.]

She didn't need to ask the voice to show her Fox McCloud. As she was thinking it a view screen appeared for her and showed him to her. As she watched him, she could hear his thoughts, his worries, all the details zipping through his head as the older fox tried to reason his way through every problem he imagined could arise. It was intimidating being inside his head, the background noise of his own thoughts filled with memories of combat and death, the destruction of warships and space fighters, the voices of long dead foes ringing in his ears as they challenged him and then when they cursed him as they died.

How did he, how could anyone, live like this with all that noise and pain inside?

"Krystal?" He called out to her, looking up at the large crystal that she now knew contained her body. She could even see herself on the view screen.

"Fox, there is a hole in the floor in front of me. Extend your command staff and insert the large end into the hole like a key." She told him, and he immediately moved into action by popping the staff to its full length and moving towards her, searching for the hole, then kneeling down to unplug several wires that had been affixed to it by the scientists from before. Once the hole was clear he inserted it inside with the double handed grip.

"Ok, it's done."

All he'd need to do now was hold tight to the grip and think of a specific command. She had all this information now in her head that she wasn't sure how she knew. One moment she'd have a question and then the next she'd suddenly have an answer like information was being fed into her brain as soon as she needed it and without asking the voice for guidance.

"How much time do we need to get away from the facility?" she asked him.

As soon as she asked the question, she could hear in his thoughts the mental equation he was working to determine his answer. He was recounting the path back out of the Stronghold by memory, counting the steps and the time it would take, and he was guessing at how long it would take for his Arwing to fly to him on autopilot, and factoring in the time it would take to radio Dr Tappa to tell him to exit the Arwing and warn the EarthWalker village.

She had her answer now and spoke the command.

"Initiate Failure Protocol Threta Pol Gahni. T Minus 30 minutes."

"Half an hour, that's my be-" He replied, but cut himself off as the lights in the central chamber all turned red, bathing everything in a crimson hue. A warning tone began to play in the Stronghold, repeating in Krazoan a call to evacuate to a safe distance. No one but her and the voice would have been able to understand the warning to flee.

"You need to call your Arwing now, Fox! Grab the staff and think these words, quickly! Stasis Override Zero Eight Two Eight Five Zero Zero."

Fox's thoughts were now swimming in a state of electric panic as he grabbed tight to the staff and began to repeat the words and numbers in his head just as she'd instructed. As soon as he was finished the void around her began to vanish into black.

[Stasis Override Initiated. Farewell, Interim Navigator Krystal. A Report Shall Be Sent To The Masters Prior To Stronghold Primea's Destruction With A Record Of Your Service.]

Around her the real world came into view, the crystal that had encased her was evaporating like ice under hot water. As the material vanished, she could feel her body again, but numb as if it had been soaked in painkillers. With her limbs weighing her down like lead she collapsed from the evaporating material and into the waiting arms of the pilot, who caught her and pulled her feet free of the crystal before it vanished completely from sight.

"Dr, where are you? Are you at my Arwing?" Fox was laying her gently down on the floor. As the numbness faded from her body the cold chill of the floor bled into her, and beneath that chill she was reminded of the pain of her injuries, that she'd been stripped naked. Pain and shame filled her, and it was only growing faster and faster and she felt her heart beginning to race.

"I need you to get back to the village and warn everyone to start moving away from the ruin's, get as far away as you can! There's going to be an explosion, a big one! Do it now, Doctor, you've got half an hour before it blows! NOW!" He was shouting at the communicator, but she could hear him twice. Once through her ears and once in her head, every word a clone of itself as she read his mind, with his internal monologue was faster and drenched in detail.

The background noise of the void was gone, but it had been replaced with a softer noise that was now all around her. As the pain of her broken ribs screamed at her, she could hear the dull aching thrum of another's pain. So many others were in pain!

Fox had injuries he was ignoring, a wounded leg, and there was more, everywhere around her she could feel numerous confused voices chattering away about their injuries, their fear, a great wellspring of panic and terror was awakening around her, and she couldn't block it out!

A big voice, confused and angry, was rousing somewhere nearby but she couldn't find it through all the noise.

"Arwing 01, seal cockpit and launch. Home to my location, maintain low altitude!" Fox was still talking, and she opened her eyes, the red light blinding her at first, but as she blinked her vision cleared. Looking up at him he was looking down at her, a worried look on his face before he stood up and ran from her, in his head she could hear him thinking, wanting to find something he could cover her body with, but now there was someone else searching for him.

The big voice, its thoughts storming in a rage, she could feel him now, her eyes tracking the room for the source. It was the Admiral from before! She watched helplessly as he forced himself up from the floor with Fox's back turned to him. She tried to speak, but her throat and mouth was dry and full of cotton, leaving her to choke. She tried to 'think' at Fox, but she couldn't reach him, he was too concerned with ripping a jacket off a soldier to notice the Admiral staggering to his feet and reaching for the gun on his belt.

"F-Fox!" She barked painfully at last, drawing his attention towards her, Krystal feeling in his mind the sudden shot of alarm as he caught sight of the reptile in his periphery. She could feel

every movement of both men as they drew their weapons from their holsters and leveled them at each other, her screaming behind shut eyes as the weapons both fired.

A flash of pain came from the Admiral as he flew into a rage, Krystal forcing herself to look, now watching in horror as the huge dinosaur charged at Fox, his blaster missing and clattering to the floor away from him. Fox hesitated, thinking to himself that his opponent was unarmed, that hesitation failing him as the reptile swung his fist, Fox jerking his head out of harm's way only to be sent flying by a shoulder slam to the chest.

The smaller man went flying, his grip on his weapon failing and letting it hit the floor. Krystal forced herself to roll off her back, the pain knocking the wind from her chest. For the briefest of moments, she had mental clarity, a silence falling over her as the pain pushed away all the noise. As the parade of voices returned, so did Fox's thoughts as he wrestled with the bigger reptile.

A balled fist collided with his skull, Krystal losing track of his thoughts in the brief moment he was knocked unconscious, the Admiral slamming his fist into him again and again, the fox helpless to stop the towering brute. The Admiral's thoughts were terrifying, with rage and elation filling him, the thought of murdering Fox McCloud sending a rush of ecstasy through him as he reveled in the blood spilling from the cuts appearing on the fox's face.

She had to do something! Climbing to her knees against the tidal wave of pain she reached for the Command Staff, feeling the cold metal under her fingers before wrapping them tightly around it. With what little strength she had she pulled it free from the socket, her body toppling to its side, staff clattering to the floor.

All that knowledge that had been fed to her in the void was telling her how the Staff worked, so she knew that she just needed to point the larger end at the Admiral, and then she knew exactly what to think!

Krystal could see inside the Admiral's mind the moment his attention was finally distracted enough to turn to her, and she could feel the rush of danger he felt as he saw the end of the staff open sideways to reveal a bright white light. The Staff ejected its charge with a dull roar, the bolt of energy slamming into the Admiral's side, his mind screaming an avalanche of pain before blacking out as he lost consciousness, his body crumpling to the side.

She retracted the staff as Fox pulled himself out from under the reptile and crawled to his feet.

"We have to leave before anyone else wakes up!" She heard him say twice, the noise surrounding her making more sense to her now. If the Admiral could wake up, then that meant she didn't kill everyone. There were more soldiers!

"I didn't kill them all." she struggled to say, clinging to the Staff as Fox lifted her into his arms and began to carry her through the room and out the chamber.

"Yeah, I noticed!" He replied, both angry and frustrated, pain echoing through his head, blinking away the blood from his eyes.

Fox was hurt, this naked girl was hurt, the soldiers were hurt, everything everywhere was hurt and in less than half an hour everyone was going to be dead! The only good thing was that this girl was light enough for him to carry without slowing him down. His Arwing was in the sky and flying towards their position, but he'd have to find a place for it to land and get this girl up into the cockpit, and he'd have to do that without a ladder!

He ran down the next corridor, his memory aiding him in backtracking his way towards the entrance. As he ran down another corridor, he passed by a handful of soldiers that were trying to wake their companions. He ignored them, ignored their shouting, and kept running. It didn't look like anyone here was in fit enough condition to go chasing after somebody. Hell, Fox was hardly fit enough to be doing what he was!

The precious little time he had to get to the Arwing and to safety was running out, and when he came to the entrance, he had three armed soldiers training their rifles at him. There was an ATV behind them with the engine running, like they'd only just arrived with a fourth man rising up from the collapsed guards Fox had passed on the way in.

"Hands up!" One shouted at him, but Fox had his arms full of teenage girl and couldn't rightly comply.

He hesitated, shrugged.

"Kinda got my hands full, pal." He smarted off. The soldier in the lead signaled to two of his men and they began to walk around to Fox's either side to flank him.

"Then I suggest you drop her before we light the two of you up, now!" He ordered, but Fox knew there was going to be an awfully large problem in less than twenty to twenty five minutes from now.

"You won't believe me, but this place is going to explode in a few minutes!" He shouted, but the soldiers didn't seem phased. The girl in his arms groaned, almost whimpering in his grip.

"Psy. Psy Pa-Purge." She muttered, and suddenly he felt his headache come back, almost losing his grip on her as his knees went weak. The soldier in the lead suddenly became distracted, shaking his head and reaching up to his now bleeding nose. The other three all joined him in their confusion, their noses suddenly bleeding, the capillaries in their eyes bursting and turning their scleras red.

In less than thirty seconds all four had been knocked to the ground.

"Run." She whimpered again, and the headache he was feeling was gone. That was scary, that really fucking scared him, so he started running. She literally said a word and four men just dropped! How did she do that?

"I'm sorry." She began to sob, Fox adjusting his grip under her back and legs as he ran to the ATV, her moans of pain growing louder as his every foot fall sent shocks up his body and into hers.

"It's ok, it's going to be ok! My Arwing is coming this way!" He said, finding the backseat of the ATV empty and sliding her into it. He was wishing now that he'd thought to grab his blaster, but too late now!

Knowing his time was running out he kept glancing at the corner of his headset's display, eyeing the distance tracker that told him how far away his Arwing was from him. He hopped behind the wheel and started driving, keeping the girl in his thoughts every time he drove over a rock or a bump, her noises of pain sending waves of guilt through him as he navigated the broken terrain to find a way out to the tree line.

He found a spot that wasn't too bad to drive over and crossed the rock and debris, the girl crying out at every rock and shake of the vehicle.

"Sorry, you're going to have to hang on!"

He sped off on the grass, away from the spotlights and toward any direction that didn't have trees, finding old trails that must have been used by the science teams. A few minutes later he put on the brakes and hopped out of the ATV, finding the girl whimpering in the backseat, clinging to the staff and a loose seat belt.

The tracker was telling him the Arwing was near, and shortly after he could hear the engine roaring in the distance, Fox lifted the vixen out of the vehicle and anxiously held her close to him.

"Ships almost here." He tried to reassure her, but she only moaned in reply.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the nose of his Arwing came into view, the rest of his ship following as the thrust of its engines rocked the trees beneath it from their force. With wind now whipping at their faces the fighter's autopilot pivoted the craft through its landing procedure, landing gear dropping to the earth and settling into the soil.

"Almost there!" he shouted, before setting the girl gently on the ground so he could jump up to the cockpit to find a way to safely lift her into the craft. Seeing his jacket crumpled into the pilot's seat he grabbed it, then jumped back down.

"Yes, I'll try." She said as he rushed to her side, his confusion palpable. He was going to ask her if she had enough strength to hold onto him with her arms while he used his jacket as a sling under her butt. Her legs didn't seem strong enough to wrap around him on their own.

He shook out his jacket and slid it under butt, then gently pulled her up by the arms before twisting himself around so she could grab him around the neck. Using the sleeves of his jacket he hoisted her up onto his back and tied the sleeves around his middle like a belt. Now he could climb up into the cockpit with her.

They were running out of time, but when he finally settled into his seat with the girl in his lap, he felt safe, if only a little. As he piloted the Arwing back into the sky the girl was whimpering through the pain as she pulled his jacket on to cover herself.

He hit the thrusters and they flew off into the sky with every intention of putting as much distance between them and what would soon become a crater. As they ascended through the

night sky Fox could see on his radar countless other vessels around him scrambling to do the same. Well, that was a problem, he thought.

“They know.” She whimpered.

“Yeah, seems like it.” He replied.

A muffled voice was in the distance as his thoughts swam through the dull fog of pain. The Admiral’s head felt like it was splitting open, but he blinked his eyes open despite it. The world was full of fog, his vision turned crimson, and the taste of iron and blood was in his mouth. A foreign language was dully talking, incessant and persistent, he couldn’t make any sense of what it was saying, he didn’t know if it was his injury impairing his comprehension or if it was truly alien.

It was so hard to move, he ached, but he was remembering. He, his men, what had happened to them. The nosebleeds! He’d collapsed, and as he began to recall what had happened his clarity of mind began to return to him. Fueled by his anger he roused as someone started shouting over the noise of the alien tongue, a voice he could understand.

“Do it now, Doctor, you’ve got half an hour before it blows! NOW!” A male voice cried, and that was his trigger. He tried to blink away the fog, flexing the fingers of his remaining hand as he tried to will his body out of its short-lived atrophy. What was going to blow? This alarmed him.

Turning towards the voice he saw two figures, one nude and blue and one orange, a male in a green vest. Blinking again he saw the man’s profile, a fox not in Imperial fatigues. Scales gritted his teeth, watched as the fox set the girl onto the floor, it was the girl from the research team, she was alive! He followed the fox with his eyes as he moved away to search one of the bodies of his men, and then he pushed himself up.

Lifting himself up off the ground he nearly staggered and fell but caught himself. He reached for his sidearm.

“F-Fox!” the girl shouted, the fox turned sharply, the two men locking eyes before they both drew their weapons. Scales shot first, the blast whizzing past the fox’s head missing him only by an inch. Firing second, the fox scored a hit on Scale’s sidearm, the blast hitting the barrel of his gun and knocking it from his hand and sending it skidding across the floor.

Enraged, he charged, letting his weight carry him forward with a balled fist ready to strike. The fox didn’t shoot quick enough, and he closed the gap between them and swung his fist, missing narrowly, but salvaged his failed strike by turning it into a shoulder slam, throwing his body into the fox and letting all his built-up momentum come crashing against the smaller man.

He had the fox pinned to the floor; his weapon discarded on the floor. He.. He recognized him! It was him! Scales’ raised his fist and slammed it into the side of the fox’s head, making contact with the man’s cheek bone sending his head to briefly droop limp to the floor as his eyes fluttered shut before popping back open.

Fox McCloud was the pilot of the Arwing! He raised his fist again and struck, the fox trying to block the coming blows, but lacked the physical strength to overpower the large dinosaur as he pummeled away at him with abandon. He was going to kill him! This was his chance to kill him, and he could do it with his bare hands!

Something blue was moving to his side, and he felt uneasy all of a sudden, passing a glance into the girl's direction. Seeing her grope at a metal stick he wasn't worried, as it wasn't McCloud's sidearm, but then she pointed it at him with the end of it popping open to reveal a glowing light. There was a loud boom, a bright flash of light, then something hot slammed into his side, a geyser overtaking him as he lost consciousness again.

But it wasn't the end.

Scales found himself lost in the fog again, time moving strangely for him. As the fog cleared, he felt himself being moved, no, being dragged across the floor. When he opened his eyes, the walls were sliding past him, but two men were holding him by the arms as they drug him down a corridor. There was a trail of blood following behind him.

"He's awake! Stop!" A third soldier staggered and dropped to his knee next to him as the pair holding his arms stopped in their tracks.

"Admiral, you're seriously injured, we're taking you to medical, everyone needs to see medical, shuttles are inbound!"

He got a good look at the man, saw it was one of his Sergeants... Sergeant Mire.

"Mire!" Scales shouted, his memories flooding back, shoving away the fog even as the pain from his ribs exploded into the forefront of his mind, making him hiss through gritted teeth. He looked down to see the injury, and it was bad. Flesh was missing, and what was left was singed and cauterized from the heat. He'd been shot by something stronger than a blaster bolt!

"McCloud was here!" He shouted, his rage threatening to push him over the edge, but then he remembered what the fox had been shouting when he first regained consciousness, the corridor they were in was bathed in red light with the dull alien language repeating itself in the background.

"Sir? The Star Fox Team?" The Sergeant scooted himself closer. The Admiral reached out, ignoring the pain that lanced through him, and grabbed the Sergeant by his jacket.

"Evacuate the facility! It's going to detonate! Evacuate everyone immediately!" He shouted, the Sergeant jumping upright, the two soldiers not needing to be given orders.

The pair started dragging him again, faster now, sliding the reptile down the corridor as fast as he could while the Sergeant got on the radio and started shouting more orders to anyone he could get to listen. As they drug him through the halls he saw the bodies of his men, most of them limp on the floor, some were slumped against the walls, some moving and some not.

"Casualties?" He hissed.

"We don't know, Sir, lots of us didn't make it! Sergeant Mire assumed command when we found you unconscious and Lieutenant Kanis dead." The soldier to his left replied. More rage began to fill him then, and it only continued to grow as he counted more bodies lying dead in the halls.

When they reached the exit, a shuttle was just setting down, and the two soldiers who'd brought him out were helping him to his feet. A confused squad of soldiers filed out of the shuttle's now open cargo bay, and were immediately met with orders from Sergeant Mire.

"Get everyone into the shuttle! This place is going to blow, we're evac'ing now!" The Sergeant shouted.

Now on his feet with one soldier under his arm for support, he walked his way up the loading ramp. A member of the shuttle crew was popping loose the metal benches from the cargo bay's sides and folding them down. The soldier under his arm guided him to a bench and laid him down on his back, the bench not quite wide enough to hold someone with as much size as himself.

"Sir, you need to remain still, Sir, you're badly injured." The soldier was calm.

"I know I'm wounded, Private! Go help them load the shuttle!" He shouted, then lifted his arm and grabbed onto a loose strap hanging from the wall and held onto it to keep himself on the bench.

"Sergeant!" He shouted, and a moment later a man approached.

"Admiral?" It was Sergeant Mire.

"I don't know how much time has passed, but I want us out of here in five minutes! McCloud set this place to blow in thirty!"

"Shit! Yes, Sir!" He replied, then ran off, passing by soldiers as they walked and carried men into the cargo bay to join the Admiral. They were working quickly, trying to get as many as they could into the cargo bay within the short time that they had.

"No, you don't understand, we must bring these!" A familiar voice shouted.

"We are only evac'ing the wounded!" Sergeant Mire shouted back.

The Admiral lifted himself up off the bench, seeing two men struggle to pull a metal dolly through the dirt just outside the facility's doors. It was laden with two large white objects that looked like crystals, or prisms. Six sided and coming to sharp points at their two ends. Recognition hit him, and he knew what those were!

"Bring them! Help them load them!" He shouted from the bench before collapsing onto his back, feeling himself go lightheaded as the pain threatened to knock him unconscious again. A soldier came to his side, jabbing a small vial against his neck to administer a dose of morphine.

"Sir, you're badly injured." Urgent worry was in this one's voice.

He grabbed the soldier, a fellow reptile, and looked him in the eyes.

“Tell them I’m ordering them to do as the Doctor says and bring the batteries!” He ordered, then let the soldier go who nodded in fear before jumping up to run out the back of the shuttle. Shortly thereafter five men were shoving the dolly up onto the loading ramp and into the back of the shuttle, other soldiers moving the wounded out of the way so the batteries could be secured against the back wall.

“Admiral! Our time’s up, we’ve got a second shuttle on the way. Do I tell them to pull back to the Grand Gambit?”

“Did we pull everyone out?” He asked.

The Sergeant shook his head.

“Not enough time, Sir. We’ve loaded everyone we were able to get to their feet.” The Sergeant replied. He scanned the cargo hold, which was now filled with no more than forty of his men, and that included the shuttle crew. He’d taken over a hundred men into that facility!

His blood began to boil.

“Launch the shuttle! Have the Grand Gambit ready to receive our wounded!” The Admiral shouted, then laid himself back down to the bench as the loading ramp began to lift shut.

Within Stronghold Primea the countdown was nearing its end. The red lights of warning that bathed every corridor were now beginning to dim. The remains of the soldiers who’d died from the Psionic Purge were left where they’d fallen, and the handful of surviving men who were still trapped behind sealed Gates were to experience their final moments in darkness as the lights finally shut off.

Resting ten miles beneath where the Central Chamber sat was the Core Chamber. It was here that the Krozoa kept their largest Kinetic Cell, the large white prism that gave an infinite amount of power to the Stronghold. Held aloft by a metallic tether that not only drew out its energy, but also allowed it the freedom to spin so that it could generate its power, it was now spinning at over 50,000 rpms. With the planet’s geothermal energy supplying the push it needed to spin, and thus generate its enormous potential, the prism was now being primed for overload. The faster it spun the more power it would generate; it was a source of limitless energy so easy to produce that it could supply power to every planet in the Lylat System and beyond.

But now it was creating all this power for no greater purpose than to end itself. The tether holding it now no longer drew out its power, and with nowhere for the energy to flow the prism would soon shatter. Faster and faster, it spun until it was but a liquid blur within its silent chamber, a white light consuming the room until the ambient temperature had risen to over 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

[Beginning Final Operating Procedure. Launching Probe.]

The Artificial Intelligence, Central Command, had completed its report of all that had occurred on Primea, loading the data onto a satellite probe before launching it. The object shot out of its silo like a bullet, punching through the thin ground cover that hid the silo from primitive eyes.

Quickly passing easily through the Defense Field surrounding the planet, it fell into orbit around Primea. The probe then encrypted and broadcasted its report on a military channel before detonating itself to prevent capture.

With that accomplished, Central Command performed its last act. The Artificial Intelligence that had watched over Primea for thousands of years committed suicide, erasing itself from existence and removing any chance of stopping the Stronghold's destruction.

The Krazoan voice urging evacuation stopped, then began to count down from ten in its foreign tongue, the expansive power grid that had been woven through the planet's mantle layer was then disabled. Its many ribs and ribbons detonating on command, severing the Stronghold from the source of its power, and denying any who'd come after the means to use it themselves.

At eight seconds remaining, the electrical systems within the Stronghold all began to fail, cutting off all hope for the soldiers that were desperately trying to force open just one more Gate, their terror and despair consuming them in their last moments, their instincts telling them that they were soon to die.

At five seconds, the Core Chamber reached 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and the prism began to crack, slinging liquid light across the chamber, its heat slicing through the impenetrable material that could stop even the strongest of weapons fire.

Four seconds, and the native wildlife around the Stronghold felt the powerful surge of the ground beneath them, sending them scattering for somewhere to hide.

Three seconds, and the Core Chamber was breached, light flooding the Stronghold one level at a time as the searing heat bounced across the polished surfaces to cook everything in its path.

Two seconds, and the soldiers all vanished into ash.

One second left, and light erupted from the entrance, turning night into day.

The prism ruptured, the ancient battery now a ball of energy so dense that it could not expand outward as an explosion, but instead drew everything into it. The gravity well was so great that it rivaled that of a black hole, its event horizon ripping and tearing apart the Stronghold, shattering metal like glass before evaporating it like water, corridors twisting into ribbons, support columns were ground to dust, then rendered molten in a flash.

The surface above Stronghold Primea, ten miles in diameter, then collapsed in on itself, and in an instant half the planet experienced the sunlight of an artificial star at the moment of its birth, and then it bore witness to its death. The light consumed everything without care or reverence.

The light faded, night returned, and all that was left of Stronghold Primea was a yawning chasm in the ground where a great civilization had once planted its flag.

And up above it all, the Planetary Defense Field vibrated, then slowly faded as the last of its power vanished, and dozens upon dozens of flickering lights all flew to the heavens at best speed. The Imperial armada had been freed, and now their War would resume.

Chapter 08//TERROR

<< E.B.S. Grand Gambit, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

“Sir, please, we must get you to Medical! You are badly injured!”

Admiral Scales shoved the doctor, actually his Chief Medical Officer, out of his way, nearly limping his way down the corridor as he made his way to the ship’s bridge. The shot of morphine he’d been given in the shuttle was beginning to wear off and the bandages that the field medic applied in the hangar bay were soaked through with blood.

“Doctor, you will facilitate my continued leadership of this fleet, or I will see to it that you are thrown in the brig!” Scales shouted, stopping briefly enough to shoot a glare at the shorter man, who stood his ground.

“If you die, then what happens?” He asked, defiant.

The Admiral sneered, then turned away and continued toward the bridge.

“Bring whatever medical equipment you require to the bridge. You will tend to me there.” He relented and overheard the doctor behind him beginning giving instructions to both the nurses that accompanied him and to the soldiers that had escorted them. Once on the bridge he eased himself into his seat and ignored the concerned looks from the bridge staff.

“Inform the fleet that I have resumed direct command of the 3rd Fleet. I want all ships in the sky!”

“S-Sir, something is happening behind us!”

“If it was an explosion then we were correct to retreat.” Scales replied, narrowing his attention to the shield ahead of them in the distant sky.

“I’ve never seen an explosion like this on radar, Sir.”

Scales sneered, then winced as a shockwave slammed into the ship from behind. The turbulence sent men tumbling to the floor, the entire vessel lurching backwards with their view through the window tilting and moving backwards as if something had grabbed the ship and was hauling it back the way they’d come.

“Are we under attack!” Shouted an officer from Tactical, others pulling themselves back to their stations while the Admiral felt the wind felt leave his lungs as the pain in his side nearly left him vomiting on the floor.

The ship stabilized and fell still once more, his crew all scrambling to assess the cause of the ship’s sudden instability.

“Whatever was happening behind us just stopped, Sir, I- I can’t explain what it was! We were already twenty miles away from ground zero! Was that nuclear?”

“Nuclear would have knocked us forward!” Another crewman at Tactical countered.

“It doesn’t matter!” Scales shut them all down, pulling himself back upright and swallowing down the bile he felt rising in his throat.

“We will rendezvous with the rest of the fleet and assume a phalanx formation!”

The bridge crew all fell into line, their discipline returning under the watchful eye of their leader. As the ship gained altitude the Admiral could see the rest of his fleet beginning to take to the skies from the distant sea, the majority of them having taken refuge under the water’s surface the moment they’d reached Sauria.

Those ships in the distance were small now, but in a few minutes, they’d be together again, a fleet as large now as it had been at the start of the War. He wondered what the Cornerians had sent to face him.

Before them all, the shimmering barrier that held them captive on the planet began to ripple, and then quietly faded.

“Sir, my sensors aren’t detecting anything overhead, the shield appears to be gone.”

“Fire one of our anti air batteries where the shield was, Tactical.”

“Aye, aye!”

A moment later and weapons fire erupted from the starboard side of the ship, four laser bolts lancing skyward. Everyone on the bridge waited, but nothing happened. The four bolts continued upwards until they faded from view.

“We will continue our rendezvous! Inform all ships that as soon as we’ve made formation we will ascend to orbit as one unit!”

The bridge erupted in a triumphant “Aye, Aye!”

Behind him the bridge door opened, and the doctor and his nurses stepped onto the bridge. The team of three approached the Admiral, and he consented to their care by standing and letting the two nurses remove his jacket before cutting away the remains of his shirt. The two men discarded the torn shirt and began obeying the doctor’s instructions on how to remove the soiled bandage and begin to clean the wound.

“Your prognosis, Doctor?” He asked, feigning indifference as he kept his attention forward with the rest of the ship crew focusing on their duties, and noticeably trying to ignore their commander’s condition.

“You were struck by an energy weapon, more powerful than a standard blaster. You’re only alive because you’re muscular. You’re missing a lot of flesh and your ribs are broken, and it looks like pieces of bone are missing. There’s partial cauterization of the wound from the weapon. Right now, I can’t say for certain how bad your internal damage is. That would require an x-ray.”

“Control my pain and keep the wound bandaged. When the battle is resolved I will follow you to Medical, Doctor.”

When there didn’t come an immediate reply, he turned to stare the doctor down, the ape’s aged features looked grim. After a moment the older man nodded and began to personally assist in helping tend to the Admiral’s wounds and began requesting dosages of medication to mitigate the damage that had been done.

As they worked on him, the Grand Gambit continued its course and within minutes it had reunited with the rest of the fleet, it’s escorts leaving their posts to assume their position within the phalanx as the fleet, now united, rose ever skyward. Once Tactical confirmed that the formation had been completed, the Admiral issued the command for all ships to ascend into orbit around Sauria.

“The Cornerian fleet is 442 kilometers to our starboard side, Admiral, at 2 o'clock.” His helmsman informed him.

He winced as the doctor began to apply a spray adhesive to his wound, the medical sealant burning like alcohol as it bonded to his flesh to create an airtight seal to protect him from further infection.

“Have the phalanx turn 60 degrees, inform all ships to ready their main guns.” He commanded.

“We’re being hailed, Admiral.”

“Give me Engineering, now. I want a status report from Dr. Boone!” He ignored the Cornerians, and instead focused his attention elsewhere. Moments later a voice came to life over the bridge loudspeakers from Engineering.

“Yes, Admiral! I’m here.”

“Can our main gun be fired? Is it ready?”

“No, Sir, I need another... we’re mounting the first battery and moving soon to the second. Once mounted we’ll need to run diagnostics and calibrations. Fifteen minutes, maybe twenty. These are minimum estimates, Sir. With the power potential we’re working with, everything must be done correctly.”

Fifteen minutes or more without the main gun... But he would trust the Doctor.

“Carry on, Doctor Boone. I expect the main gun to be ready to fire in fifteen, no less!” He shot back.

“Admiral, I’ll inform you the instant it’s ready.”

He lifted his hand and waved it, his Comms officer killing the link to Engineering.

“Status report.”

“Sir, all ships are signaling that they are ready to fire on your orders.”

“Are the Cornerian’s still hailing us?”

“Yes, Admiral.”

He nodded, gesturing his hand to Comms, who then turned back to his console. Scales instructed one of the nurses to help him with his jacket, the Admiral pulling his good arm through the sleeve while letting the other side of the jacket hang loosely over his injured arm and side to hide them from view.

A hologram flickered to life in front of the Admiral and his crew, and they were greeted by a middle aged man in a sharp grey Cornerian uniform. The slender canine reached up to adjust his cap.

"I'm requesting an audience with the commander of your fleet."

"You have him." Scales replied, taking a step closer to the hologram. The dog in the hologram narrowed his gaze, and Scales eyed him hard, trying to assess his opponent. The canine's posture was stiff, arms clasped behind his back, showing discipline without revealing any sign of alarm or concern in his expression.

"The war is over. This does not need to escalate any further than it already has. I would like to negotiate the release of the hostages you have taken." His unknown rival said.

"And who are you to be doing these negotiations?" Scales asked in return, buying more time for Engineering. Fifteen minutes wasn't too long of a wait for a battle that had yet to start.

"I am Admiral Lyle Dachshund of the Cornerian 5th Fleet, and you are?"

"Admiral Rex Tyrannous Scales, of the Imperial 3rd Fleet."

"I believe you were conspicuously absent when we descended on Venom in the final days." His rival replied, the corners of his mouth curling up in a smile. That barb did not go unnoticed.

"And I believe your competence was conspicuously absent when we laid siege to Katina, Admiral Dachshund."

His rival remained silent; a barb traded for a barb. The 5th Fleet had been responsible for Katina's defense during the war, and was no doubt led by this man. The "Iron Shield" of Katina did in fact put up a great resistance, thwarted only due to being outnumbered 2 to 1. He reached back to his chair and thumbed the button that would mute the bridge to prevent the Cornerians from hearing.

"How many in their fleet?"

"49, Admiral."

"But I will repeat myself, Admiral Scales. This does not need to escalate. We are willing to negotiate the release of your hostages." The canine interrupted them. Scales eyed the man, considering. He wasn't quite outnumbered two to one yet, but in ten or so minutes he would be. As for the hostages, they were still on Sauria, alive, but left to rot in their cages. They weren't of any use to the Empire now.

He thumbed the switch on his chair again, knowing he could now speak to the Cornerian.

"I'm afraid you're not in the position to bargain, Admiral. We'll speak again when you're ready to surrender. End transmission."

The hologram immediately shut off, and Scales raised his hand and pointed at the sparkling lights far off in the distant space, the Cornerian fleet giving itself away with their blue shields and caution lights.

"Broadcast to all ships in the fleet," he announced, his Comms officer quickly working the console controls before turning to him and nodding. "All ships, open fire!"

Then, all at once, the entirety of the Imperial 3rd Fleet fired its main guns, each with an effective range of 500 kilometers. The cascade of weapons fire was breathtaking. Hundreds of laser bolts lanced across the stars and seemed to vanish as they reached their intended targets. A great violence erupted as each bolt collided with the enemy's shields, explosions spreading like fire across the wall of Cornerian defenses.

"Estimating 90% of our shots landed, Sir! Incoming return fire!"

"Brace for impact!" Scales shouted to his fleet as flash of blue light echoed in the distance, growing in brightness as the enemy weapons fire lanced at them through space, colliding with the Grand Gambit's shields and shattering across their surface, the bridge's forward window adjusting for the brightness to prevent the crew from being blinded. A moment passed before another cascade of blue light flashed in the distance as the Cornerians were firing a second volley.

"All units close ranks and advance, and fire when ready! Deploy all fighter squadrons!" He shouted, the adrenaline surging through his system shoving the pain back as he clenched his fist in front of him. The second volley hit, shattering again across the Grand Gambit's shield, the bridge again adjusting for the brilliance flashes of light. He thrust his hand forward, aiming a finger at the Cornerians, a wicked smile on his lips.

"Let the slaughter begin!" He cried as his fleet launched their own second volley.

<< C.A.S. Eternal, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

"Damage report!" Admiral Dachshund shouted from his seat on the bridge. The Imperial fleet had yet to pause their laser barrage, and the Eternal's forward shields were holding.

“Negligible damage, sir! All ships are holding, but I’m getting multiple reports of fighter squadrons being sighted just out of range of our anti-air defenses.” His chief tactical officer shouted in reply.

Stepping towards Tactical he surveyed the layout of the enemy on the battle grid, and quickly understood their formation.

“Signal to the fleet that I want an immediate shift to a Star formation. I want four cruisers on every battleship, protect those flanks and throw power to the forward shields!”

“Roger!” Came a shout from his communication staff. The bridge was alive with activity as his orders, both spoken and silent, flowed from him and to his fleet. He was outnumbered and outgunned, but he’d held out at Katina for three days before finally being crippled, and he didn’t need to wait three days for reinforcements this time. The cavalry would soon come, and when it did they’d crush the Empire together for a second time.

“Sir! Affirmations incoming, the fleet is now in position, we’re getting requests for fighter support.”

The admiral nodded, and lifted his hand and shook the officer a gesture to ‘go ahead’. Within the next five minutes he’d have over a hundred fighters in the air. He didn’t know how many fighters the enemy had, but with that many battleships in their fleet it wouldn’t be a shock to Dachshund if they had more than he did.

It wouldn’t matter in the end. The “Iron Shield” would hold the line. When he lost Katina he had an entire planet to worry about with a fleet in orbit stretched so thin it was like tissue paper, but here on Sauria there was no need to protect the planet, and he suspected the enemy had no reason to flee, thus making this a direct conflict with no surprises. All Dachshund needed to do was hold the line with a tight formation, his Iron Shield.

“Admiral, we’re getting a request from The Great Fox.”

“Which is?”

“Fox McCloud has escaped the planet, but they are requesting support to help reach him. Apparently his Arwing is damaged.” The officer replied. The Admiral frowned, and paced his over to Communications, extending his hand to the officer at the console. He was handed the headset and lifted it to his ear.

“This is Admiral Dachshund.” He said.

“Admiral!” An older voice replied. “We’d appreciate it if you could lend us a hand, Fox is almost on the other side of the enemy fleet!”

He sneered, but not at The Star Fox Team. He bore no ill will to the savior’s of Katina. They’d come to the planet’s rescue after all when the Iron Shield was left broken in orbit.

“I will not sacrifice the integrity of my fleet, but if The Great Fox is willing to fall in with the 5th Fleet’s formation, I will detach our Husky Squadron to render aid.”

"Of course, Admiral. Wherever you need the Great Fox we'll get her there." The voice replied, and the Admiral nodded.

"Very good. Send word to Fox McCloud that help is soon coming. Dachshund, Out." He replied, then handed the headset back to the communications officer. "Give this order to the Husky Squadron, that they are to detach from the 5th and form up as escort to Fox McCloud. Make sure he makes it back to us in one piece."

"Roger!" The officer replied, putting his headset back on and relaying the order.

"Admiral, we've got fighters coming within range!" A shout to him from tactical.

"Then let's not be rude, gentlemen! Answer them!" He shouted, now resuming his post at his seat, flicking out his hand and issuing the command for the Eternal to launch its next volley of weapons fire, every cannon on the ship belching out a lance of molten light towards the flickering lights that were their enemy.

<< Arwing 01, In Orbit around Sauria >>

Fox was dangerously close to falling back into the Saurian atmosphere. When he'd come up into orbit, he had a swarm of battle cruisers coming up with him, and there weren't many places for him to go that was safe! On his radar he had fifteen signals pursuing him from behind. Probably enemy fighters that had launched right after their mothership had made it into orbit.

"Fox, the Cornerians are sending a squadron to help, but they want The Great Fox to stay with the fleet." Peppy was telling him over the radio. A laser zipped past him, but it missed by a dozen or so meters. If those fighters kept gaining ground on him then those lasers were about to get a lot more accurate.

"Well, I guess that's good news given the circumstances!" He replied.

"Sorry, Fox. How bad is your Arwing?"

"Banged up still, engines giving me maybe 90% of its max output. These Imperial fighters are actually faster than me right now, and my G-Diffuser is still shot." Fox said grimly.

"You can still shoot, right?"

"Yep. But I got an injured party here in the cockpit with me. What are the chances I can get her to a ship?"

There was a pause with Fox adjusting his flight path to avoid another laser by several meters. It felt like the distant fighters weren't out to kill him yet, just probing. Waiting for him to get within deadly range before they'd all open fire.

"If you can link up with that fighter squadron, then they can help you limp back to the 5th." The hare told him. According to his radar the 5th fleet was an awfully long way away.

“Roger, that. And where are you guys?”

“We’ve departed The Great Fox and are trying to link up with the Husky Squadron. We’re gonna be there to help get you back, Fox.”

“No! As much as I like the idea, everything I’ve seen over the last couple of hours has me thinking you should stay with the fleet. Just got a feeling it’ll be a good idea to have the three of you there just in case something happens.” Fox told him, not really sure himself as to why. It was just a feeling of unease resting in his gut that told him he should resist the urge to regroup. Having Peppy and the others near the Great Fox was the right idea even if he couldn’t put his finger on why.

“Alright, that’s what we’ll do.” Peppy replied, but the reluctance was clear in his voice.

“I’ll be in good hands, Pep. The Husky Squadron showing up will make it feel just like the Academy, except with more gunfire.”

The hare replied with a laugh.

“Yeah, I guess that’d be true.”

“Fox.” The girl whispered up from his lap. Since launching she’d curled up in his lap, making it difficult for him to use both his arms to pilot his ship. He glanced down at her, noticing the grey bags that had formed under her eyes. She looked so weak, favoring what looked to be a side injury. He thought to ask her how she was holding up.

“I’m ok. My ribs are broken.” She told him, her voice nearly hoarse. He swallowed uneasily, both at her being that badly injured but also that she’d been answering his questions before he’d get the chance to ask them himself.

“I can hear you think.” She replied to that thought with a dry voice. A cold sensation fell over him, like ice water. He then recalled standing there with her in his arms, the armed men standing ahead of them with their guns right before they all began to double over and collapse. The girl started to sniff, her crying again.

“I’m sorry.” She whimpered. His thoughts weren’t his anymore, were they?

“We’re going to get you somewhere safe, ok?” He said it as soon as he thought it, not giving her time to reply to him first.

“I can,” she started, then stopped to catch her breath, her body flinching in pain for a moment before relaxing again. “I can hear so many people talking. All their voices.”

She gasped in pain, Fox feeling her shift in his lap until she’d found a new position that favored her ribs better.

What are they saying, Fox thought to himself, testing her on purpose this time.

“There’s too many of them. I- I can see your ship from the outside.”

See it from the outside? Must be all those fighters tailing them. His radar was showing them gaining, his engines just weren't up to the challenge of outrunning these guys even if their fighters were inferior. At least his engine wasn't overheating, so he could throttle it up without fear.

"Faster." She said.

"This is the best we can do." He replied.

A cascade of laser fire erupted above him. Every shot missed, but he cautiously angled his trajectory down, bringing him a little closer to Sauria and its atmosphere. Skimming the surface of the planet's atmosphere had helped maximize the distance between him and the Empire, but he was going to have to turn his nose up eventually if he wanted to make his way to the Cornerians.

"No." she whimpered, adding. "Have to fly up."

"Why?" There was a wall of laser fire still lancing overhead, there was no way he could fly up through that without his G-Diffuser.

"Trap!" She winced.

Feeling alarmed he tried nudging the nose of his Arwing up, bringing him closer to the wall of laser fire. A fresh volley of weapons fire joined, and he ducked back low, the threat of those lasers was too great! Then to his left and right he saw more laser fire. Looking back up overhead, then at his radar he saw the fighters behind him were spreading out behind him.

They were boxing him in, so he had nowhere to go but down, but he didn't think his Arwing could survive another trip through reentry though he doubted the enemy knew that. If he was their squad leader, he'd be doing this to make a target easy pickings. You naturally slowed down as you burned through the atmosphere, becoming an easier target to hit.

"You can hear what they are planning?" He asked, letting his eyes dart across space searching for any avenue of escape. He tried to imagine himself flying through a corridor with walls to his every side, searching for a gap through which to slip through.

"I- I don't know. They're all thinking the same thing, trying to keep you still."

He could feel the noose tightening, the laser fire not even trying to target him now, just a steady volley as fast as the fighters could pump them out, keeping him locked in place. His eyes were alert, but when he felt the girl's reach out to touch his hand and the flight stick, he was distracted.

Before he could tell her to stop, she shoved the flight stick hard to the left, his anger shooting through the roof as his Arwing spun hard to the side. Red light illuminated the right side of his ship as a massive energy beam lanced through the laser fire and right where they'd been just moments before.

"Shit!" He pulled control of the Arwing back from the girl and yanked back on the stick, seeing the laser fire had stopped when the energy cannon had taken its shot. The lasers erupted at him again, trying to envelop him in another web of light, but failed to catch him this time.

How did she know to do that? She figured out what they were planning?

"I can, I can understand the noise if they all think the same thing." She gasped, the girl pulling her hand back to cradle it against her chest next to the retracted staff she still carried.

"There are thousands of people in orbit around Sauria! You can hear every voice?" He asked.

"Yes! It's all noise, too many of them." She whimpered again.

Fox was frustrated. He had an asset sitting in his lap that could read the enemy's mind, but there were so damn many of them that the only way she'd know what they were thinking is if they were all thinking the same thing. How often were they going to be that lucky on the battlefield, he thought?

With the chaos of weapons fire echoing around him he wasn't going to hold his breath.

<< E.B.S. Grand Gambit, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Dr. Boone stood at the edge of the catwalk overlooking the work being done overhead. From the ape's vantage point he could see all of Engineering, the Grand Gambit's internal organs making for an incredible sight to behold. This ship wasn't just his life's work, but a tribute to the Emperor. Without Lord Andross' genius Dr Boone's team would never have been able to realize this feat.

To design a warship around a main gun of this magnitude was unheard of, nay, impossible! The power draw was too high, and no reactor in Lylat could provide enough power to fire a weapon like this at full charge. 20% output was the best they could achieve with the Gambit's twin reactors, but even then, the ship had to go into standby and let the reactors replenish the ship's power.

Being forced to wait an hour between discharges would have rendered the Grand Gambit a pitiful main battle weapon, but now... Now that was not so!

"Doctor! Kinetic Battery A has been installed!" One of his technicians shouted from the crane that held the man aloft. The massive dual reactor was beneath them, one of the largest to be built by Venomian scientists, but floating overhead was the delicate rack Lord Andross had designed, and that Boone had brought to life with the skill of his own hand.

The mechanical structure connected itself to the reactor like a spider crouching over its prey, an apparatus designed to house the Kinetic Batteries and serve as a conduit through which power could flow. Nestled within the rack, existed two sockets where each Battery was to be mounted, and now half their job was done. The second Battery they'd recovered was being mounted now.

As soon as they were finished, they could run their first operations test. If power from the reactor could be successfully routed to the Kinetic Batteries, then they would activate, beginning their rotation and power production. The arms of the spider could then route that power back to the ship's power grid, feeding energy into the Grand Gambit at an accelerated rate far beyond the dual reactor's capabilities!

The only question is just how much power could be drawn from the Kinetic Batteries?

Several minutes later a second technician shouted that the second Battery had been successfully mounted within the structure, and both men were now pulling their cranes away from the mounts and back towards the walls.

Boone jogged his way down the catwalk to rejoin the rest of his team at the main reactor's control center located in the fore of Engineering. Still overlooking the reactor, the control center was an open-air platform that afforded the team a clear view of everything occurring within Engineering, and the Doctor could now see the reactor from the front, and the web of mechanic 'legs' now tethered to it. The white crystal prisms floating within the structure appeared to him almost like eyes staring back at him.

"Run operation test alpha, point one percent power." He announced, a fellow scientist to his left began to work the controls on the console while three others monitored a dozen other panels and information screens. The doctor had only eyes for the Batteries.

"Point one percent power active. Routing now."

The tech's hand touched a dial, adjusting the power from the reactor to the Batteries, and in an instant the two prisms began to spin. Slowly at first, like the minute hand of an analog clock, but there it was. Success.

"Feedback?" He asked, looking down at the console for the first time, the ape's eyes dancing across every screen to personally check each and every readout.

"Nothing unexpected, Doctor. Everything's staying in the green."

The feedback from the Batteries was nominal. The power was being routed to the Batteries, provoking them to generate power of their own, and then that power was now being fed back to the reactor to be shunted off by the lance circuits and into the Grand Gambit's power grid.

"A slow turn, three seconds per whole percent. Let's increase the power." He announced. The technician at his side carefully fingered the dial and began to very gently turn it. Every three

seconds the dial ramped up the power by a single percentage point, and the Doctor watched as the Batteries spun ever faster.

“Everything remains green, Doctor.” A technician to his right advised him.

A broad smile was growing across the ape’s crimson face. All their work, after all these years, was finally bearing the fruit the Emperor had so rightly predicted would grow!

“Let me.” The doctor said, stepped over to his colleague, taking control of the dial for himself. His hand was shaking, but he calmed it, and began to gently turn the dial more, and more, and more again. With each added percent of power the Batteries spun faster and faster until they no longer appeared as prisms, having long lost their geometric edges through their rotation, appearing now only as pure white ovals throbbing with power. His team stood in silence as they all monitored the console, checking and double checking each piece of feedback they received from both the reactor and the Batteries.

The dial could be turned no further.

“100%.” He whispered.

“All systems are green, Doctor.” A colleague whispered just as quietly. They all stood in awe before the twin white eyes of the spider as it fed the Grand Gambit with more power than could ever be truly calculated.

“Tell the Admiral that the Grand Gambit is complete.” Dr Boone said to his team, one of them quickly excusing themselves and hurrying to send his message to the ship’s bridge.

Dr Boone lifted his hands skyward, catching the two Batteries in his hands, holding them tight in his mind’s eye.

“Truly magnificent!” He said, then began to laugh.

“Admiral!” a shout came from Tactical.

“Report.”

“Engineering reports that the Kinetic Batteries have been successfully mounted and that Dr Boone says the Grand Gambit is ‘complete’, Sir.” Replied the officer.

“Sir! I’m registering a huge spike in available power from the reactor. Admiral, I’ve never seen it this high even when we fire the main gun!” Another officer next to him replied. Scales began to smile, standing up from his seat and stepping over to Tactical to see the display for himself.

“Here, Sir, available power is maxed out at 100%, but the numerical reading is locked at 999,999. I have no idea how much power we actually have available to us.” The same officer told him.

“As Lord Andross intended. Unlock the forward shield array.” Scales commanded, then left Tactical to their duties, returning his seat. His Chief Medical Officer still resided on the bridge with an assistant at his side, but they each kept their respectful distance as the Admiral walked off his injuries, the pain ever present but being pushed back by the occasional administration of painkillers both oral and local.

“Deploy the array!” An officer shouted.

Outside the ship the set of four massive shield emitters unlocked themselves from the Grand Gambit’s hull. Each emitter was its own independent shield array, fully capable of projecting an energy barrier in front of the Grand Gambit that was large enough to protect the ship from any attack. The four emitters were designed to overlap their shields, weaving a grid not unlike kevlar, thus producing a force field so durable that nothing short of a nosedive into a star could penetrate it.

Normally, powering the four arrays at once would be impossible with the Grand Gambit’s dual reactor alone, but with the Kinetic Batteries anything was now possible. The arrays locked into place, their triangular reflective plates aimed dead ahead and towards the distant Cornerians.

The plates began to flicker, the power from the reactor funneling through the web network of direct filaments, the sudden heat of which cooked off the protective layer of lacquer that had been applied to the array when they’d first been constructed in dry dock. As the wispy dust floated through space in front of the ship, the four shields activated for the first time, the Gambit’s primary defensive shield shutting off in response as designed. With a fleet of allied battleships flanking the Grand Gambit the ship had no need for shields except from the front.

A glowing green disc appeared in front of the Grand Gambit, and with that in place there was nothing the Cornerians could shoot at them that could ever hope to damage the fleet’s flagship vessel.

“Ready the main gun. I want maximum output.” He ordered.

“Aye, Aye! Shunting power to the main gun.”

“Barrel temperature rising, but within tolerances, prepping heat vents now.”

As his men dutifully prepared the weapon to fire, he felt himself growing restless, a tingling sensation dancing across his skin as the moment grew closer. He turned to Communications and ordered them to signal the fleet that the Grand Gambit was about to fire the main gun. Feeling his ego swell in his chest he ordered all his ships in the fleet to cease their fire and to signal all fighter squadrons to abort their sorties and return to allied flanks. He wanted the Cornerians to pay close attention to what was about to kill them.

“Admiral, the main gun is ready to fire!” shouted an officer from Tactical.

“Helm, aim for the center of their formation.” He commanded, his helmsman immediately taking control of the vessel and adjusting the ship’s orientation.

Scales stood again, approaching Tactical, and with him already familiar with the console and its controls he gestured for his men to move. The officers stepped aside as he reached his hand out to grab the firing lever. He didn’t feel anything as he held the leather wrapped steel in his hand, sweat beading up on his brow as he felt a terrible excitement welling up within him. So much power was hiding behind a single pull of a lever that it was almost impossible to believe!

He didn’t know what would happen when he fired the main gun, no one could. Before this moment the full power of this ship existed only in the realm of theory.

The Admiral pulled the lever to fire, and it offered him no resistance, almost as if the Grand Gambit was just as excited as he was to find out just how much destructive power it could unleash.

In front of them the four massive shield arrays went offline, and their mechanical arms rotated the arrays out of the ship’s line of fire to protect them. With the firing path now clear, the ship activated its firing sequence.

The whole ship began to vibrate, each man on the bridge feeling it through his boots and up to his teeth, every pair of eyes glued to the view ahead of them, of the Cornerian fleet. They all heard a boom, like an object breaching the sound barrier, and the ship’s crimson bow was suddenly enveloped in the brightest of white light. The bridge’s windows struggled to mitigate the light, to stop it from flooding the bridge with its brilliance and blinding its occupants, but failing, being forced to shut off the window, protecting the crew, but leaving them blind to the results of their weapon’s fire. It would take several moments for the cameras to reset themselves and restore the windows back to operation.

The bridge crew, and the Admiral, waited with bated breath.

<< Arwing 01, In Orbit around Sauria >>

Something was happening! She could feel it, could hear it in the distance as so many voices all began to flow in the same direction. The pain of her injuries was making it difficult to concentrate on what they were all saying, but she could just barely make out the hundreds upon hundreds of voices all filled with a terrible excitement and curiosity.

“What the hell?” Fox said, her catching him pivot his head around the cockpit and out into space. “They’ve all stopped shooting?”

She didn’t understand what was going on, but something horrible was coming! All the excitement she felt, the curiosity pulling over a thousand minds into a trance, was hiding something so dark that she couldn’t wrap her head around it. They were all thinking the same thing, that something was ‘complete’, that something was ready!

“Th-they’re going to do something!” She told Fox, not knowing what else to say, her helplessness gnawing at her bones as she continued in vain to single out a voice in the distance that could reveal what was going to happen.

“You’ve got that right, the fighters on our tail all just peeled off!” He replied, Krystal hearing a lot more than that in his head, a man trying to recount his every encounter, his every battle, assessing and reviewing his own tactics, all so that he could predict what the enemy was planning to do, but coming up empty.

A bright light filled the cockpit, blinding both of them. The thousands of voices around her were suddenly fixated on the light. She felt their confusion, their excitement, the sudden panic, their terror. Hundreds of voices vanished, like a hole had simply appeared in the orchestra of souls, shattering the harmony of its music. As Fox blinked away the light, his confusion and anxiety palpable, she could only scream.

He pulled her close, she could hear him asking her what was wrong as tears fell down her cheeks, the voices of hundreds were suddenly gone from her mind like they’d never existed. Every single voice gone, all of them, they were dead! They were all dead, she knew they were dead, how could she know they were all dead!

“What? Wait, no, I’m fine, Slippy, what’s that?” Fox was talking to someone now, his thoughts distracted, being pulled in multiple directions. He tried to caress her, hoping to silence her, his hand moving over her mouth as she wept, her scream muffled by his hand.

“What the hell was that light!” He shouted into his radio.

“What do you mean that was a weapon!” He shouted again.

<< C.A.S. Eternal, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Admiral Dachshund was on the bridge of his flagship, having only just stood up from his seat, his hands still gripped tight to the armrests as he blinked his vision clear. His bridge crew were in a panic, his helmsman was requesting orders for what to do, for where to go. Tactical was coordinating weapons fire, Communications was in a frenzy.

“Admiral, we lost contact with the Duchess!” An officer shouted from Comms.

“What’s their status, report?” He asked, prying his hands off the seat, and stepped forward, pointing to his helmsman to hold position. Dachshund couldn’t risk a maneuver right now when he didn’t fully understand what the enemy had just done. That white light had preceded some kind of weapons fire!

“S-Sir, they’re gone.” Comms replied.

“Gone? I want a report!” He shouted back.

“Wait, the Sheridan has just reported they’ve lost visual contact with the Sinclair and her escorts.” The officer replied, the dog’s voice beginning to tremble.

“I’ve lost another,” the officer next to him replied, his hand pressed to his headset, knuckles going white under his fur. “No one can make visual contact with the Duchess or her escorts. The entire formation is gone!”

“Hail them!” the Admiral demanded.

“They’re gone, Admiral! They aren’t there anymore!” was the strained reply, the officer’s voice wavering with notes of fear. “It’s like they just vanished!”

Two battleships and their cruisers gone, like that? That was ten vessels, a whole fifth of his fleet! How could they just be... Gone! What kind of weapon could do that?

Fear then gripped him, as soon as it hit him that he’d ordered his entire fleet to assume a tight defensive formation...

“We- We must split our forces! Order the fleet to spread out! Now! Do it now, dammit!” The Admiral shouted. The Iron Shield had been broken.

Chapter 09//SACRIFICE

<< EarthWalker Territory, Planet Sauria >>

For the doctor, it hadn't been easy to convince the EarthWalker King to order his people to flee their homes. If Tappa and his colleagues hadn't worked so hard to earn the trust of the locals, they might not have listened to him when he begged them all to run. He didn't know what Fox McCloud was on about, but he understood how to follow an order and that self-destruct sequences were serious business. If the Empire was going to be responsible for an explosion, then it'd no doubt be a big one!

When 'it' happened, it was the most frightening thing. All of a sudden it was as if daylight had come early, brilliant light illuminating the jungles of Sauria as the villagers struggled to move as quickly as they could, carrying the old on their backs and the young in their arms. They'd all been forced to leave everything behind.

As he looked back from where they'd come, he couldn't see a plume of smoke like he'd expected to, but he had seen... the clouds move. They all moved towards the light like they were being drawn into it. The tapir did not want to dwell on that part at all, his intellect trying to rationalize with science how such a phenomenon could occur.

They were now many miles from the village, and everyone was frightened. When the light had receded and the night sky went dark again, they could all see the flickering light of starships moving skyward. The defense field vanished, too, and those flickering lights just kept on going upwards into space. There were so many of them...

Amidst the stars of Sauria there were flashes of light. The doctor had never witnessed a space battle from a planet's surface before. It was eerily beautiful.

"Nxuk uho kxo cawxkj ad kxo jbo?" King EarthWalker asked him, wanting to know what the flashing streaks of light meant in the sky above them.

Warriors, Dr. Tappa explained. They were fighting in the night sky to protect Sauria, he added. Not just Sauria, but the rest of Lylat, not that the village people here knew much of the world outside their jungle home.

He had to leave his communication equipment behind, so he had no idea what was going on apart from what was obviously a battle.

"Nacc kxo jbo tolacj ro tovoukot?" The King asked if the Empire would lose. Tappa didn't know, but he was hopeful. They'd been beaten before, but at great cost, and with an entire fleet of Corneria's finest out there... He remained hopeful.

As he continued to watch the lights in the sky, he became accustomed to their pattern, so when the pattern changed, he noticed. It was like half the lights in the sky had vanished, and for a moment he was left confused as to why.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light, almost identical to the one from before, but it came from space. The night sky was illuminated for a brief moment, revealing to him a solid beam of light

that streaked across space in an instant before vanishing entirely. The sky fell dark again, the flickering lights of battle having all stopped. A moment passed and the lights resumed.

The King asked what the big light meant; the doctor was terrified at what the answer might mean.

<< Arwing 01, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

The Cornerian fleet was in shambles, split apart and scattered as allied ships desperately attempted to put distance between each other to prevent another devastating loss like what they'd just suffered. Fox was keyed into the Cornerian combat channels, listening to the panicked voices of officers disseminating their orders.

At least they weren't bad orders. The entire fleet was now separated into two complete halves, each half moving to flank the Empire, whose fleet had not yet broken rank. The radio chatter gave him some hope that the Admiral in charge, an Admiral Dachshund, knew what he was doing.

Fox looked down at the girl, the teenager had quieted herself down, but she was still distraught from before. He couldn't worry about her reading his thoughts anymore, privacy was hardly the top of his concerns now. She'd been crying about how people had died before he even got word on the radio that several of their ships had been destroyed!

She could figure all that out on her own with just her mind.

"Fox McCloud, can you read me, over?" A familiar male voice spoke up over the radio, using the Star Fox Team's private channel.

"I can read you, Bill. I hope you brought friends?" Fox asked, knowing that the dog on the other end was coming with the Husky Squadron in tow. With at least a dozen fighters coming in to escort him he felt a lot better, and it was nice that a familiar face was attached as squadron leader.

"You bet, Fox. We're here to deliver you back behind friendly lines. What's your condition?"

"G-Diffuser is out, engine output reduced to 90% top speed, but my weapons are intact and ready to go. I can fight, but I can't afford to get hit."

"Well, we've got you covered. We're almost on you, should be seeing us on your radar." The dog replied.

Several signatures were appearing on his radar in rapid succession, signaling to him that the Husky Squadron was coming within range. As he watched the radar displaying his allies, more blips began to appear from other directions behind him. He flexed his grip on the flight stick.

"You picking all this up on your radar?" He asked aloud.

“Right, keep straight and we’ll come to your flanks. I’m reading eight, now nine signatures.”

“Be patient, Bill. I’ve got thirteen on mine.”

“Ha! It’ll be an even match then! A squadron for a squadron.” Bill replied with forced cheer. Fox forced a wry smile. It didn’t feel like he was going to catch a break today.

When he linked up with Bill and the Husky Squadron the Cornerian fighters pulled around to Fox’s sides and together they flew as a unit, making for as direct a path as possible to the nearest half of the 5th Fleet. As they did so the fighters behind them were growing impatient and shooting off their lasers at a distance.

Both squadrons were slowly closing in on each other with Fox’s reduced speed forcing the Cornerians to throttle their own fighters back to keep themselves from outrunning their charge. This was going to get bad.

“I don’t have the speed to outrun them, and I’m slowing you guys down.” Fox told Bill, knowing full well that a battle was going to break out whether they were ready for it or not.

“What’re you thinking?” the dog asked.

“Fight them.” The girl spoke up weakly. Was she agreeing with him? He’d already been thinking that.

“Fight them.” She repeated.

“Let’s take the fight to them, Bill. Better to face them head on than to get shot in the back.”

“Right, I agree.”

Fox began to turn his Arwing around, and the entire squadron followed his lead. Soon they were rapidly closing the gap between them and the enemy. The radar was counting down the distance until a flurry of laser fire erupted at them. Each member of the Husky Squadron evaded and returned fire. Seconds later both squadrons collided, fighters zipping past each other, laser blazing red hot and turning this sector of space into an all-out war zone.

Fox’s thumb held the trigger to charge his lasers and launched a bolt of energy at a stray fighter that had broken too far away from his friends. The two made contact and the enemy ship erupted, the girl going rigid as soon as the explosion had ripped through the enemy ship, tearing it into pieces.

She was left panting, covering her mouth with her hand, knuckles white under her fur like she was in pain. Did she feel that? Was she going to feel this every time someone died?

“Yes.” She said through her hand, anguish in her voice.

It was a chilling thought, knowing he was going to put her through so much pain just trying to stay alive and win this fight.

“We have to fight them!” She countered, covering her mouth back and holding her muzzle shut.

He set his jaws and found his next target, feeling the girl flinch against him as the light of an explosion reflected in the glass of his cockpit.

“Was that one of ours?” he thumbed his radio to ask.

“No! But they’re trying to make sure the next one is!” Bill shouted back.

“Then let’s keep them disappointed!” Fox shouted back, pulling the trigger on his next target.

<< E.B.S. Grand Gambit, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Sergeant Mire had just left the infirmary, the medical staff clearing him for active duty, and whatever that would entail in this battle. His injuries were milder than some of the others that had made it out of the Force Point Temple. He still had a lingering headache, but he was promised by a nurse that it would subside before being given painkillers to help with the discomfort.

It was all a load of shit; he wasn’t a doctor, but he understood how to read a man’s face when he was playing poker. It didn’t look like the medics had any idea what had happened to them all down there. It looked like they were spooked by it.

Mire was a soldier, so he only knew he could still walk and pull a trigger. If he had to endure a mild headache for a few hours while he finished a fight, then he would. He’d go wherever he was ordered to go, which at present was the bridge. The Admiral had asked for him and what remained of his ‘old unit’.

When he reached the bulkhead that led to the ship’s bridge his old unit was there waiting for him. The three men, two apes and a fellow reptile, had not been in the Temple. These were members from his unit during the war, and since then they’d been shuffled to other parts of the fleet, but now here they were again, together.

They each pivoted on their heels to face him, snapping to a salute. Mire saluted them in return, nodding to them and making eye contact with each one in turn.

“Glad to be back, Sir.” The first of them, an ape named Tanner, said. The other two, Mackenzie and Ringo, nodded in agreement.

“Old faces, old memories. Let’s make some new ones.” He replied, and all three men set their jaws and put their hands behind their backs. Professionalism.

They were granted permission to enter the bridge and stood at the back of the large room as the command staff directed the flow of battle. Mire could see the Admiral was not faring well with his injuries, and it caused him some concern. He’d already lost his hand, and now on that same side he was bandaged up for some kind of severe wound. Mire hadn’t been there to see what had caused it.

“Sergeant Mire!” the Admiral shouted upon seeing him and his team standing at attention.

“Admiral!” He snapped a salute in reply, his team salute with him in record time.

The large dinosaur approached them, the Admiral hiding his limp. Seeing him from the front now, Mire knew the Admiral was avoiding going to the infirmary. That would explain why there was a small medical staff here on the bridge. Mire tightened his posture, casting aside his irritation over a headache when his commander was fighting a war having been injured so much worse than himself.

“You were injured in the Temple, but a report said you’d been cleared for duty?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir. I was cleared, feeling no worse for wear. If you have orders, I will be glad to follow them.”

The tall man eyed him seriously, then nodded.

“Somewhere out there is The Great Fox. I want your team to destroy it.” The Admiral said, his voice serious.

Destroy The Great Fox? That was an incredible task to be given, considering that ship’s history. But... It was out there with one of its fighters allegedly damaged. Could his team manage it? It was difficult to say, the fear of failure was at the tip of his tongue, but he also had a burning desire to hop back into a cockpit again, to feel the cold steel of a grip in his palm.

“As you command, Admiral. We’ll see it done or die in the attempt.” He replied, saluting.

“Then you have your orders, prepare to sortie, launch when ready!” The Admiral replied, nodding before pivoting on a foot to return to the bridge and the frenzied chaos of command. Mire turned to his team, nodding to them in turn. They all wore looks that shared his feelings. A tall order had been made, and they were expected to fill it.

“Let’s go.” Mire told them.

The four men left the bridge and immediately made their way to the hangar bay. The Grand Gambit did not carry a large complement of fighters, as it was designed primarily as a weapons platform, but it did have enough room for the hardware Sergeant Mire needed for his team.

They were the only four pilots to survive the fighting in Sector Y. The heavy action had been intense with the attrition on both sides reaching the incalculable. Out of the four squadrons that Lord Andross had commissioned, it had been Mire’s team that weathered the storm and came out of it unscathed. They’d each become aces in their field, and the Admiral saw to it that their machines were refitted and upgraded as much as possible.

The Sergeant stood in the hangar bay, looking up at the maintenance crews as they crawled over his machine, doing their final checks before clearing them for battle.

It would be good to pilot his Shogun again. The massive mechanoid machine had been his weapon and friend in Sector Y, and now it would be so again at Sauria. The tally marks he’d had the mechanics carve into his shield read fourteen fighters and two battleships. Between the

four of them his team had inflicted enough damage on the Cornerians that the remains of their tattered fleet had been able to flee to safety, the enemy too preoccupied with licking their wounds to pursue.

“She’s ready to go!” He smiled as a technician shouted to him from the open cockpit of his Shogun.

“And so am I.” He replied, now making his way to the gantry.

<< Arwing 03, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Peppy Hare was doing his best to juggle his radio and his flight stick at the same time. While ROB kept him updated on the fleet’s condition, he had to keep up with his two younger wingmen, Slippy and Falco. The latter, their resident ace, was holding his own against the enemy fighter squadrons that were trying, and failing, to overtake The Great Fox.

Between Slippy and himself, the remaining members of the Star Fox Team were doing alright, too, but Peppy was old and getting too grey around the edges. These weren’t the same battles he and James had fought together so long ago.

“Peppy, the Beta Division’s advance towards the enemy left flank has resumed. The C.A.S. Marco and Iridani have taken heavy damage.” ROB told him over the radio.

When the center of the 5th Fleets formation had been destroyed Admiral Dachshund had ordered the fleet to split into two divisions, hastily designated Alpha and Beta, with the hope of splitting the enemy’s attention and forces, and gambling that if they moved quickly enough to the enemy’s flanks that they could entrap them between the Cornerian’s and what was assumed to be their flagship.

The ship that had fired that weapon.

If the Cornerians could keep that weapon from firing by using the enemy as a shield, then there was hope they could last long enough for reinforcements to arrive. Even with the early warning from Fox that the 5th would be outnumbered it was a struggle getting a new fleet to arrive. The closest fleet to Sauria had been Corneria’s 2nd Fleet, but they weren’t due to arrive for another hour.

Could they last that long? He didn’t know, but so far, they’d not lost another ship, but they’d started taking casualties among their fighter squadrons. They were simply too greatly outnumbered, and once their number of fighters was sufficiently thinned out the Empire wouldn’t need their big gun to wipe them out anymore. Their air superiority would start picking off their battleships one by one.

“Any news from Fox?” Slippy asked, and Peppy didn’t have an answer apart from that he’d linked up with the Husky Squadron, and was now engaging the enemy, and he told the frog as much.

“How’s everyone holding up out there?” Peppy asked his wingmen and found relief in both their voices and that they were still holding the line against superior numbers.

His radar was a mess of signals, so many of them it was difficult to sort through. When four new signals appeared at the outer edge of the radar the rabbit didn’t even notice, as they just blended in with the mass of glowing red signals from all the other fighters swarming the battlefield.

A laser bolt struck his Arwing, his ship’s shields crackling briefly before shattering and deflecting the bolt, leaving a black streak across his bow. Looking up, he saw three more lasers coming at him, and he yanked the stick to the right and thumbed his G-Diffuser, deflecting all three lasers and sending them scattering while his foot hit the foot pedal, triggering his booster.

Where his Arwing had been just prior was now filled with more laser fire, with a single large mechanoid quickly falling into place behind Peppy.

“Peppy, we got robots!” Slippy shouted, but he was already well aware. He spotted two more machines pivoting a hundred meters above him, their apogee motors firing in all directions to hold their positions as they pumped out round after round of laser fire at Peppy’s Arwing.

Slippy laid into the pair with his own lasers, but the twin machines launched apart and deflected the attacks with their massive shields. Peppy throttled up his Arwing and caught a glimpse at the first mech he’d seen, which was now pursuing him. He remembered those!

“We’ve fought these before!” He shouted.

“What’s that? What’s going on?” It was Falco, who had now strayed too far away from the rest of the Team and The Great Fox in his pursuit of more prey.

“We got three, no, four big robots! They’ve got laser cannons and shields!” Peppy replied.

“Those shields deflect better than our G-Diffusers! My shots didn’t even scratch their paint!” Slippy added.

Peppy triggered his G-Diffuser and pulled an Immelmann, tilting his nose up and rolling backwards until he was upside down and aimed back at the enemy. With a spin he deflected more laser fire with his G-Diffuser and spun himself upright again. With his finger on the trigger, he launched a counterattack, his target thrusting out its shield and tucking his legs up behind it to shrink his size. Each laser hit before bouncing off the shield before the machine returned fire from behind the shield.

He spun to the left, deflecting his opponents attack, then slammed his boosters again when another machine appeared overhead and laid into him with his own rifle.

“These guys are good! Falco, break off what you’re doing and get back here!” Peppy shouted, the bird on the other end signaling he was breaking off his pursuit and falling back to The Great Fox. Slippy flew up next to Peppy and together they began to turn themselves back to face their opponents. The four machines stared back at them from behind their shields, their ape-like faces alight with red glowing eyes, before they each opened fire on the pair.

<< Shogun Alpha, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Mire pulled his legs up, his limbs strapped tight to the Shogun's leg controls, the machine responding by lifting its own legs up. The Arwings ahead of him dealt only glancing blows with their shield freshly painted up with a special material normally reserved for battleship hulls. A simple laser wasn't going to penetrate this shield!

"We got lucky there's only two!" Ringo, one of his squad mates, shouted from his right side.

"There's a third somewhere nearby, so watch your radar! I don't trust Howler Squadron to keep that one busy for long with the losses they're taking." Mire replied, hitting his thrusters, launching his Shogun vertically while he continued to return fire, both Arwings zipping past him from below with breathtaking speed.

These fighters were fast!

"Ringo, Tanner, focus on target A! Mackenzie form up with me on target B. First of us to take out our target gets dibs on the third one!" Mire ordered, a Shogun quickly appearing to his left side, his weapon in hand and already leading his shots on their target. Mire joined him, watching their shots as they were deflected by the Arwing's defense system.

A frustrating opponent, but at least a Shogun didn't have to pull a special flight maneuver to defend itself! He and Mackenzie launched toward their target at full throttle. They weren't as fast, but their enemy wasn't trying to run away. With their slower speeds the squad of four could easily predict their opponents flight path from a distance and prepare themselves for a counterattack.

The two Arwings hadn't broken away from each other and were now speeding back towards them with lasers lancing through space at them, each bolt was a direct hit, the lasers shattering apart against their shields.

"Grenades!" Mire shouted, and with skill acquired only through practice, all four Shoguns let go of their rifles and popped free a single grenade from behind their shields. Once armed, they let the grenades float free before taking up their rifles again, breaking away in four directions, opening fire at the two Arwings and locking them tight to their original flight path.

They flew right through the spot the Shoguns had just been, and all four grenades detonated across the Arwing's hulls.

<< Arwing 03, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Warning klaxons were screaming in his ears as the eruption of several explosives hammered his Arwing's shields. Both he and Slippy veered apart, hitting their boosters, and escaping with laser fire leading their trajectories wherever they flew.

"Slippy! Are you all right?" He asked over radio.

"My shields are out!" He replied, Peppy thumping his console to shut off the siren that was warning him his shields were also gone. He rapidly checked his ship's condition, noting his G-Diffuser was still operable, but without any shields he was left in a sorry state.

"G-Diffuser?"

"I still got mine, but that was close! We can't handle something like that again!" the frog replied, and Peppy was in full agreement.

He began to turn his fighter around, catching sight of The Great Fox in the distance. He thumbed his headset.

"ROB, can you get a target lock on those mechs we're fighting?"

"Affirmative. You and Slippy have engaged four Shogun class Imperial mechanoids."

"Good! Keep that lock on them, we've taken heavy damage and we're missing Fox and Falco! I want you to let me know if you get a clear shot at them as soon as you do!"

"What weapons system should I deploy?"

"Use the nose gun! Surely it's strong enough to punch through their shields."

"Roger." The robot replied.

The rabbit finished his turn and began to circle the group of four mechs. They'd been grouped together, but now had broken up into groups of two with a pair of them heading straight for him.

"Slippy, just hold out until Falco gets back. ROB is going to try and get a shot off on them, too!"

"Copy that, but these guys are really persistent!" The frog shouted back, Peppy clearly seeing the weapons fire in the distance as the two mechs gave chase to his wingman.

Their only advantage right now was their maneuverability and heavy firepower, but Peppy wasn't confident that a bomb would take them out. They weren't as fast as an Arwing but as soon as Peppy launched a bomb they'd see it and split.

If Peppy wanted to get in a hit, then it would take a trick just like the explosive one they'd just pulled on them.

Laser fire came his way, Peppy engaging his G-Diffuser with a spin, then veered off to keep his distance from the two mechs, which were now in hot pursuit. They must have known they'd done serious damage to their Arwings and were trying to end the fight quick. He checked his radar and saw Falco was still too far away to help, but The Great Fox was still within range.

He needed to get them to stay still! He radioed ROB and told him to pay attention to the two mechs that were tailing him, and to prep the nose gun to fire. If his plan worked then maybe they could cross one bad guy off the list. He turned his Arwing and made a beeline for The Great Fox, drawing the two mechs in behind him.

<< Shogun Alpha, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Both of the enemy were heavily damaged now, looking like their shielding systems had been disabled. Mire throttled up his rear boosters to increase his speed, causing Mackenzie to do the same. Their target was retreating back to their mothership, The Great Fox. Both pilots were laying down fire on the enemy craft, but the ship's deflector system was still operational and none of their direct hits mattered. If they were going to destroy this ship, they'd need to get through that defense first.

"Sir! We've got a third Arwing entering to sortie!" Tanner shouted over the radio.

So, they were now two for two over there.

"Draw them both back towards my position! We're pursuing our target back to The Great Fox!"

Ringo and Tanner both shouted their agreement and began to make their way back to regroup with Mire. He and Mackenzie would need to take out this single fighter before they reunited so they could turn their numerical advantage into a two to one.

"What's he doing?" Mackenzie asked.

Mire watched the Arwing up ahead of him, the ship's engines were now going at full thrust with a bright white tail of energy trailing behind him as the pilot's flight path seemed to wobble. Why wasn't he flying in a straight line when he could just use his deflector system to stop their attacks?

Then the Arwing's nose tilted up sharply, the Arwing flying straight up with a bright flash of light filling the void where it'd just been. A laser streaked through space directly at them and Mire instantly thumbed his apogee motors and darted to the side.

"I've been hit!" Mackenzie shouted. Checking the camera to his right side he saw his squad mate veering off to the side with thrusters going full bore as his Shogun favored its left side. His shield and whole left arm were missing!

The Arwing they had been pursuing finished its rotation in space and was now flying back towards them, another flash of light came from the distance, Mire seeing the nose of The Great Fox light up as it shot a laser cannon at Mackenzie's Shogun. With their mothership and one Arwing firing at them now Mire had no choice but to reverse course and fall back towards the limping Mackenzie, his machine still capable of fighting back but now without its primary defense.

“Status report!” He shouted.

“Whole left arm is missing, minor damage to torso! That laser took it clean off!”

Zooming in on The Great Fox, he could see the pivoting cannon hanging below the ship’s bridge, and then further down the ship from that were another set of guns that were even bigger! If the nose gun could rip through a Shogun’s shields that were as well armored as a battleship’s, then that double barreled main gun needed to be dealt with.

“We regroup! Form up on me, we’ll take the fight to The Great Fox!” He doubled down on his earlier command and fell back to Mackenzie’s side. Together they broke their pursuit of the lone Arwing and keyed in a new route that would link them back up with the others, and then toward their target.

He’d wasted too much time with the Arwings when he should have focused on their mothership! Now, with a third Arwing thrown into the mix the enemy’s aggression was through the roof. That third pilot was impossible to hit and was giving both Ringo and Tanner a hard time. All four pilots of the Star Fox Team were aces, but so were Mire and his team!

That nose gun from The Great Fox was still trying to tag them, but now that they were aware of its existence the threat had been neutralized, and the two wounded Arwings couldn’t mount a strong enough offense to hurt any of the Shoguns they attacked. Shortly after he’d issued the command all four of his Shoguns were together again and ready.

The third Arwing to join the fight pursued them, then launched a ball of energy from his nose. All four Shoguns broke away from each other and in their wake was a massive detonation that rocked the interior of Mire’s cockpit. That was a hell of a blast!

The Arwing flew through the space where the explosion had occurred and began to bank to the right to make another pass at them. Mire had to split his focus in four different directions to keep the Arwings and The Great Fox in check. The Arwing finished its turn and shot toward him with thrusters roaring. Laser broke against his shield, and Mire fired a well-placed leading shot at the Arwing as it passed, the pilot triggering its deflector too late and the blast nailed it in the wing, the craft’s shields flickering under the abuse.

It veered away, and all three Arwings seemed to be tracking away from them, regrouping into a single unit, before making a wide turn that would eventually turn them back around to face them.

“Mackenzie, hunker down behind one of us and fire over our shoulders.”

“Roger!” he replied, moving behind Tanner so he could be shielded as well, using his remaining arm to begin firing at the incoming fighters. All four Shoguns fired at the incoming trio, Mire keeping his attention split between them and their mothership.

The Great Fox wasn’t firing at them, and he didn’t know why.

Two of the fast-approaching fighters launched a pair of bombs from their noses, and the group was forced to separate to avoid the danger, with the third Arwing firing a bomb shortly after toward Mackenzie and Tanner’s position. The bombs detonated, rocking everyone’s machines, and causing their viewscreens to flicker briefly from interference. Mire fired off his apogee motors and backed further away, trying to locate the enemy as they zipped past them.

Ringo was several hundred meters in front of him now, pivoting his machine in an effort to track his rifle on the retreating Arwings. Mire noticed a flash of light in his periphery and watched a large laser bolt slam into Ringo's midsection, detonating the Shogun instantly.

"No!" He shouted, turning back toward The Great Fox that had been waiting for them to react to the Arwing threat.

"Commander!" Tanner shouted, coming up to his side with Mackenzie in tow.

"We break for The Great Fox, now!" He ordered, and the three Shoguns all made for the enemy's mothership. All three Arwings were now in pursuit and rapidly gaining. Mire gave the order to aim down and fire behind them, to give the Arwings something to be concerned with. A fresh laser bolt launched from the nose of the Great Fox, forcing the three of them apart and narrowly missing Mire's machine. With the paint singed off his left leg he was getting angrier.

Mackenzie reached The Great Fox first, his lasers hitting the hull with direct hits, but dealing minimal damage.

"Its hide is just as tough as the Gambit's!" Tanner remarked, the gravity of their situation was writ clearly in the tone of his voice. Their orders were to destroy this ship!

"Mackenzie, take the bridge! Tanner, fall back to one of their hangar bays. We'll disable it if we can't destroy it!" He ordered, and the three Shoguns broke away from each other with the Arwings circling their own mothership looking for a chance to take shots at them that wouldn't risk damage to their own ship.

Mire needed to do something about the ship's main gun, moving along the port side of the ship while Tanner followed the spine towards the bridge. The Arwings caught on to their plan and began to open fire, some of the lasers even finding purchase against the mothership's hull but doing little to no damage. Mire evaded, laser fire shattering across his shield, before forcing the Arwing tracking him to pull up in defense as he retaliated with rifle fire.

There was an explosion behind him, and he checked his rear-view screen to see the rear of the Great Fox erupting behind him. Tanner had detonated the last of his grenades, and now an Arwing was frantically firing at what was no doubt him.

"Their bridge is shielded! My lasers can't break through!" Mackenzie shouted, Mire abandoning the main guns and shifted to assist. He reached Mackenzie and let go of his rifle to pull another grenade off the back of his shield. Two Arwings laid into them both, forcing him to tuck in behind his shield while Mackenzie engaged in evasive maneuvers, firing his thrusters and taking him below the bow of the ship.

Laser fire caught Mackenzie in the shoulder and right hip, disabling a few of his apogees and sending him into an uncontrolled spiral as he tried to escape.

"Mackenzie, full thrust, towards the ship!" He ordered, lasers still battering his own shield as he was left without a means to retaliate, his own rifle now floating too far away for him to grab without risking a direct hit to the body.

“Commander! Just take the br-“ Mackenzie’s radio died as his Shogun was nailed in the chest, his machine detonating shortly afterwards.

Mire yanked at his controls, spinning his machine upside-down and firing his thrusters to launch himself back down below the bow towards the Great Fox’s main guns, ignoring the bridge and focusing on the guns, since even if they lost the bridge that didn’t mean the ship couldn’t fire its main weapon! He approached the barrel of the closet gun and detached a grenade from behind his shield. He was going to plug the barrel with it and blast it from the inside!

He watched through his forward view screen as his Shogun’s hand was about to drop the grenade in. The interiors of both barrels began to glow red hot, then both guns fired as one, catching his shogun in the arm and obliterating it along with the grenade.

His machine was cast aside, his machine’s arm cleaved off with the entire right side of his hull damaged and melted from being too close to the guns when they’d fired. Warning klaxons were screaming at him that he was heavily damaged, the whole right side of his cockpit’s camera feeds reduced to grey static.

“Sergeant Mire!” Tanner shouted over the radio. As Mire’s Shogun floated beneath The Great Fox he watched as his squad mate dropped beneath the ship and engaged his thrusters. He was being targeted by two, then three Arwings, half of their weapons fire bouncing off his shield before the rest hammered his machine, triggering its detonation.

He grabbed his controls, found that his remaining thrusters still worked.

Checking his cameras, he couldn’t see where his rifle had floated off to, and he gritted his teeth. A new alarm began to scream, signaling that the cockpit’s seal had been breached and that he was losing atmosphere. He ripped the oxygen mask out of the side wall and fitted it over his snout, hoping that if his machine sat idle, he could be taken for dead by the enemy. Once the mask was fitting over his face, he brought down the visor from his helmet to protect his eyes if he lost cabin pressure.

As the Great Fox moved slowly overhead, he waited to see what would happen to him, searching the space around him for any sign of his rifle, or Mackenzie’s for that matter. All he had left to defend himself with was his shield and one last grenade, and he couldn’t use that without ditching his shield for it!

An Arwing entered into his view from a distance. Even from this distance he could tell it had suffered damage all over its hull, so there was no doubt it was one of the two they’d hit with their grenades. His opportunity to destroy The Great Fox had passed, but at least Tanner had managed to deal damage to the ship’s hangar bay. Perhaps that would be enough to give this ship enough of a limp for the Admiral to notice.

The Arwing ahead of him did not fire, playing dead was working. His Shogun was critically damaged, the oxygen in the cabin was depleting rapidly with the condensation spilling out into space around it and leaving a frosted coating on his ruined armor. Yes, let the Arwing think he was dead, spilling his icy blood out into space... The fighter began to move closer for a fly by, and Mire thumbed the control to disconnect his shield from his left arm. The shield detached gently and began to float freely, and he carefully moved his remaining arm to grab the last grenade in his arsenal.

His thrusters were still operable.

Sergeant Mire disabled the warning klaxons and let the cockpit fall silent, save the sound of his breathing through his oxygen mask. This Arwing was making a mistake, it should have just shot him from a distance or left him to die. He armed the grenade and fired his thrusters to full just as the Arwing came foolishly close, the pilot's decision to check for a pulse now costing him his life.

It wasn't the ship the Admiral wanted dead, but a ship was still a ship.

The grenade detonated in his hand, the explosion overtaking his Shogun and causing it, too, to explode. The fire and brimstone Mire had unleashed consumed the Arwing as it flew by, the explosion blackening its hull and sending it spiraling out of control before it crashed into The Great Fox's hull. Sergeant Mire would not die alone.

<< E.B.S. Grand Gambit, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Scales reached up and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He'd started sweating and was now forced to ignore a worsening headache. His combination of injuries was weighing heavier on him, but he was not going to sit down and leave this battle to his crew alone.

"Admiral, the Conquest and Valor have both sent confirmation. The Cornerian flagship is the Eternal." His Comms officer reported, and Scales approached him.

"And we've still got a firm lock on its location? We're certain we've got them?" He asked.

The officer nodded, the ape moving his hands across his controls and directing his attention to one of the monitors. An image appeared on the screen of what looked like a still image from a battle. The officer zoomed in on the image and pointed at the ship's hull, and the name printed on it.

"This is the C.A.S. Eternal, taken during the Battle for Katina eight years ago." He replied, then switched to a new image before zooming in on the ship's hull, pointing out the same name printed on the side of the ship.

"These stills are from battle records of the Conquest and Valor, and their Captains both confirmed that the flagship they engaged with at Katina is this same ship our pilot just marked." He added.

The Admiral smiled. They'd been trying to track the identity of the Cornerian flagship with little success until one of their fighters got close enough to read the name on one of the enemy ship's hull. He died for the effort, but he'd been a veteran of Katina and survived his sortie long enough to report what he'd seen. His death would not be in vain. They now knew which ship was commanding the 5th Fleet.

They'd been smart in splitting their fleet into two groups, and Scales had to divide his own forces to face them. The enemy was trying to cut down their disadvantage, and they'd

successfully maneuvered themselves so that the Grand Gambit couldn't fire upon them without destroying any of his own vessels.

"Helm, position the Grand Gambit to fire on the Eternal. Comms, inform the Captains of every ship that's sitting in the way of our main gun that they are to hold position. They are to prepare to make evasive maneuvers at short notice so that we can fire on the enemy's flagship."

"Aye aye!"

"Tactical, which of our ship's is the closest to the Eternal's position?" He asked, and a moment later he got his reply.

"Comms, I will contact the Valor myself." Scales issued his request, then returned to his chair where he produced a small headset from the armrest. "I want a direct line to Valor from my chair."

"Aye aye!" An officer from Comms replied, then gestured with his hand to signal that the connection had been made.

"Admiral Scales?" A voice appeared in his ear as the Admiral held the headset up to his head.

"Captain Hyde, we're beginning preparations to fire on the Eternal. All ships in the path of our main gun will take evasive maneuvers on my command, but your ship is the closest to the enemy. I'm sorry to inform you that you and your crew will need to abandon your ship."

"Sir?"

"With our enemy so outnumbered I do not expect them to believe we would fire on one of our own ships to win. The Valor will be the bait that keeps the Eternal from fleeing." He replied.

"I understand, Admiral. I'll hate to see her lost, but I'll begin the preparations for evacuating the Valor now. How long do we have?" The Captain asked.

The Admiral considered how long he needed. The main gun had long since cooled down from its first shot and was ready to be fired at any moment. He only needed his troops to be in position.

"Five minutes. Signal the Gambit when your crew is ready to abandon the Valor." He replied, then ended the call with the Captain. He followed up with Comms that he needed all ships to signal when they were ready to begin evasive maneuvers, and that they would have only minutes to move their ship's safely out of the gun's area of effect.

Wiping his hand across his forehead again he smiled at how things were going. This battle would not grow long in tooth. In a few minutes everything would be ready, and he could take the head right off his enemy's shoulders!

"Admiral!" an officer from Comms shouted for him, pulling his attention.

"Yes, what is it?"

"I've just received word from the Captain of the Bellator. His fighter squadron is engaging Arwings near The Great Fox, and one of their pilots reported seeing the wreckage of a Shogun. There is no other sign of Sergeant Mire's team, but The Great Fox has suffered combat damage and has only two Arwings defending it." He replied.

Scales felt hot and cold. So, Mire had failed, then. If they'd managed to damage the ship and dragged one of their pilots with them into death, then he'd have no choice but to accept their sacrifice as a gift. They'd handed him a wounded enemy, and after he took care of the Eternal, he would then target The Great Fox to finish what Mire had started.

Soon, he would take his revenge for what they did to the Emperor!

<< C.A.S. Eternal, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

What was left of the Cornerian 5th Fleet was struggling to hold together. Admiral Dachshund had successfully split his forces in two, and now the Empire was being forced to do the same. So far, they'd yet to actually break apart their fleet into two separate units, but the enemy was turning their backs to each other in order to protect their flanks.

His fleet was still suffering heavy losses, which were only being mitigated by the fact that the enemy flagship couldn't fire its main gun. So long as the Admiral kept shifting his forces around the Imperial flagship was stuck looking through a sea of its own allies, and then that weapon of theirs couldn't be fired! With it effectively disabled that bought him some valuable time for reinforcements to arrive.

If they could just hold out a little longer, not even an hour now. His hands were beginning to jitter, and he needed to keep flexing his fingers to suppress it.

"Sir! The Virgo is reporting they've taken too much damage and have to retreat." An officer from Comms shouted.

"Have them pulled back behind the Calypso and Ganymede! If they have wounded, have them shuttled to a different ship." The Admiral commanded.

The Virgo was on the opposite side of the battlefield, but Dachshund was still their commander, and was directing the fight on two fronts. This was not his preferred way to wage war, but his sixteen years of command experience was aiding him well.

He looked up at the holograms projected overhead that showed the status of his fleet. Twelve of his ships were highlighted as red, gone. The rest were varying shades of orange with only a scant few actually unscathed, like his own Eternal. In the heart of the hologram was his enemy, the vast fleet all displayed as white icons. So far, they'd only managed to inflict damage, but not destroy, any of their opponent's warships. The Admiral scowled.

"Admiral, we've got one Imperial ship drifting too far ahead of their front line." Someone shouted from Tactical.

“Show me!” He requested, and an officer began to alter the holographic display to show the ship, a Granby class battleship. This was a ship they’d damaged previously, but not heavily so. It was a real fighter.

“They’ve not yet broken from the front line, but they might be vulnerable, Sir.” Tactical suggested, and the Admiral considered it. He asked what the opposing ship’s distance was from the Eternal and her three escorting ships.

“She’s dead ahead of us, but not within effective range of our main guns. We’d need to close the gap by another 3,000 meters.”

If they could destroy at least one ship on this side of the conflict that’d be rather satisfying, he thought. The combined firepower of five Cornerian battleships could break even a Granby’s sturdy shields. They weren’t invincible!

“I’ve got motion around their ship, it looks like... small fighter craft. Dozens of them!”

“Pull in Doberman Squadron and have them ready to defend us if they come in for a sortie.” He replied.

“I’m not familiar with these signatures, Sir. I don’t know what kind of fighter craft they are, but they aren’t heading towards our position. It looks like they are splitting apart and flying along their front line.”

“A flanking maneuver?”

“No? It’s difficult to track them all, but I think they are flying towards neighboring battleships.”

The Admiral stood and studied the battlefield map overhead.

“What is their front line doing?” He asked.

“We’ve got several vessels forming up on each other in a phalanx, but... it looks like they are pulling away from the ship ahead of us?” Tactical replied.

Ahead of him the ship in question began to fire its main gun. The powerful laser reached out across space and collided with the Eternal’s shields but was broken. In the distance it was clear the ship was preparing to fire again with other more distant ships beginning to fire their guns towards the Eternal, too.

“They’re specifically targeting the Eternal! Pull us back, out of their effective range!” He ordered, his Helmsman reversing the ship and drawing it back with its escorts following alongside her. The Admiral narrowed his gaze at the hologram and wondered if they had a reason for targeting the Eternal, and he wagered it was because they’d deduced that it was the 5th Fleet’s flagship.

He scowled again, concentrating on the ship that was now leading the charge against the Eternal. It sat alone in space with the ship’s closest to it...

“Admiral!” Someone from Tactical shouted, fear in his voice. “They’re preparing to fire it again!”

Dachshund looked away from the hologram, watching as the man staggered back from his post, the officer locking up with fear as the rest of Tactical joined him. Far ahead of them in space, within the heart of the Imperial fleet there was a shining light sparkling from a single vessel.

“Return to your post! What is being fired?” He shouted at the dog, the Granby ahead of them fired its main gun again, the laser shattering across the Eternal’s shields but causing no damage. Every man at Tactical acted as if they knew exactly what was coming, and fled their consoles and ran past him, drawing the rest of the crew into a mad dash to the rear of the cabin and the elevators that lay there.

The sparkling light ahead of them suddenly flashed bright, blinding the Admiral before the external camera’s overloaded and failed. In the hologram a tunnel had opened up within the enemy’s formation, and a single vessel was left to sit at its entrance. By the time Dachshund realized the Empire would sacrifice one of their own ships just to target the Eternal it was too late to do anything to stop it.

The Grand Gambit fired its main gun, a massive beam of light erupted from the nose of the ship. It first struck the Valor’s stern, the heat breaking the ship down into liquid ribbons before those too evaporated like water into steam.

The crew of the Eternal and its escorts were dead before the beam even hit them. The light in the direct path of the beam penetrated through their hulls as if it were paper thin, the temperatures inside each ship sharply rising to several thousand degrees Fahrenheit in an instant, rending everything not forged of steel into billowing ash.

The beam struck, and when the light faded there was nothing left in its wake. With its commander now dead, nearly a third of the 5th Fleet lay decimated in orbit around Sauria. News fit enough to make even the Emperor smile brightly.

Chapter 10//HUBRIS

<< Arwing 01, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

The bright light that had consumed the space around them began to fade and the two foxes could see again. Without any hesitation the fighting resumed, the hot streaks of laser fire lancing through space once more as soon as the pilots could line their sights up with their next target. The Empire had fired their weapon again, Fox seethed! He yanked back on the flight stick as the girl in his lap shuddered against his chest, cheeks soaked with tears as she bit down on her hand to silence her cries. As soon as the light had gone off, she went rigid, as if in terrible pain.

How many had died this time, he thought?

“Peppy? Slippy? Falco?” Fox thumbed his radio, calling out to anyone for a response.

An enemy fighter zoomed across his bow, nearly colliding with him. He banked hard to the right to follow him, a Cornerian fighter falling in next to him as they both opened fire. Their lasers nicked the enemy fighters wings, forcing the craft to lose control, then falling prey to the next volley of laser fire. The fighter erupted before his eyes and Fox quickly turned his attention to the next target on his radar.

“Fox!” Falco’s voice appeared through the static of growing radio interference.

“Falco! What the hell’s going on out there, who got hit this time?” He asked. There was a pause on the other end of the call, the bird’s breathing labored and under stress, the toll of heavy combat interfering with his usually boastful and sarcastic demeanor. There was no doubt about that. This was just like Venom; the memories of that hell were flooding back to him too quickly to recount with clarity.

“We lost Peppy.” The bird grunted, in pain.

The noise of combat around him sounded muffled, like something tight had wrapped around him, trapping him in space as the light of weapons fire reflected across the glass of his cockpit. His hands and feet were on autopilot, working their controls, his mind fixated on the task at hand while his chest began to constrict, his breathing becoming a struggle.

“We were attacked by these goons, and they got him! Slippy’s damaged bad, his radio stopped working. We can’t dock with the Great Fox anymore, there’s a hole blasted in the hangar door and the forward hangar is blocked off by the damn Landmaster! No repairs, no refuel, no resupply!” The bird shouted, the anger in his voice overtaking any calm he could have mustered. Fox could hear the bird hitting something in his cockpit with his fist.

“How many did we lose to the giant laser?” Fox asked, his own voice sounded muted to his ears.

“Dammit, Fox!” Falco shouted.

“Who did we lose!” He shouted back even louder, the world around coming back in focus, the sound returning, in his hands he felt an electric jitter he hadn’t felt in a long time. The tightness in his chest crawled nastily upwards until he felt it as a hard lump of rock rising in his throat.

A new voice entered the call, it was ROB.

“Fox, Admiral Dachshund’s ship and its four escorts have been destroyed. Captain Heeler of the C.A.S. Calypso has assumed command of the Cornerian 5th Fleet.” The robot answered when Falco couldn’t.

The girl tried to reach out to him with one arm, her body trembling hard against his, almost as if she was writhing in pain. Her hand found the edge of his vest and she clung to it, her finger brushing against the fur just below his neck, and where the painful lump ached. He thumbed his radio to switch to the Husky Squadron’s private line and shouted for Bill to respond.

“Yeah, what’s the word!” The dog shouted, Bill’s hands being just as full as everyone else’s. Fox’s eyes were darting across space around him, from his windows to his radar and back again.

“Will you be offended if I assume command of you and your squadron?” He asked, his voice sounding eerily calm, even to him.

“No, I take it you got a plan?” The dog asked.

Fox’s teeth were beginning to clench the more he thought about it, the sharp edges of his fangs threatening to break the skin if he so much as licked his own teeth. He thumbed the radio back to ROB and asked him to connect his Arwing with the acting commander, that he needed to talk to Captain Heeler, and to do it NOW! His anger was boiling hot by the time he heard a stranger’s voice speak over his headset, demanding to know what he wanted.

“There’s no point in splitting our forces like this if they’re just going to pick us off one by one! Order the fleet to advance, Captain! Every single ship!” Fox shouted, thinking back to the madness of Venom when he and his three wingmen dove through the enemy lines. All those powerful ships, their defense satellites, all of it uselessly firing past them as they punched their way down to the planet. They did more damage to themselves than they ever managed to land on the Star Fox Team!

“If we shove everything we got down their throats then they can’t shoot at us without shooting themselves! We’ll make every shot they take cost them twice as much to make!” Fox shouted at the other man.

“You’re insane!” The Captain shouted back at him.

“If you want to stay put where it’s safe and die like the Admiral, then go ahead, but if you don’t do what I say then the Leader of the Star Fox Team will give the order for you, and I have just as much access to the open channel as you do! If your men are going to die today, then let them drag the Empire down with them kicking and screaming!” Fox raged, his voice coming out like a snarl the likes of which he had never heard from himself before, and the other man fell silent before killing the radio link to his Arwing.

He was vibrating in his seat, fueled by so much rage he couldn't contain it! Krystal tugged at his vest. He was shaking, his eyes were burning hot as the anger welled up in him along with the pain in his throat.

"Woah! Fox, we're getting new orders!" Bill appeared in his ear. He thumbed his radio to the Cornerian general channel.

"-to advance! We're going to penetrate the enemy line and break them from the inside! We'll make them regret ever crawling out of their stinking holes!" The Captain shouted, his shaky voice a poor replacement for Fox's rage. He thumbed his radio back to Falco and ROB. He told them both to grab Slippy and begin to advance on Fox's position, and that he was now assuming command of the Husky Squadron. He wanted to unite their forces under his direct command to make a direct assault.

He spotted his next target and laid into it with a vengeance, destroying the fighter and sending its wreckage to spin wildly out of control.

"Bill?" He asked, switching his headset again.

"Yeah, Boss?"

"The Great Fox and the rest of my team are going to form up on our position. We've got a ship to kill!" Fox said, the words tasting bitter in his mouth.

Peppy had been the last living piece of his father that he had left. Andross had taken enough from him, and now he was going to make the Empire pay if it was the last thing he did!

<< E.B.S. Grand Gambit, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

"Have they lost their minds?" An officer shouted from Tactical, the entire battlefield they'd constructed had fallen apart in minutes. The two battle lines they'd erected against the Cornerians were in shambles as the cursed dogs began to advance their ships at what could only be described as 'suicidal' speed.

The Admiral looked at what was happening, and he couldn't determine if what he was seeing was a battle strategy or insanity. He leapt up from his chair, almost losing his balance, and crossed the bridge to Tactical. The injury on his side was hurting constantly now, but he wasn't going to ask for any additional painkillers, as he was afraid that taking anymore might provoke the doctor into trying to remove him from the bridge. If he was too medicated, then it could be argued that he wasn't fit to command and would need to visit the Infirmary. He instead leaned into the pain, letting it force his eyes open and keep him alert, the sharp sting giving him new life.

"Is there any pattern to what they are doing?" He demanded to know, his officers scrambling to decipher what their enemy was doing.

"N-no! They're all just advancing, they've already broken our western line!" The officer replied.

“Admiral! I’ve got multiple Captains all wanting to know what they should do! We’re being overrun!” Someone from Comms shouted, and Scales looked to Comms, then back down to Tactical, his teeth gritting painfully.

He actually didn’t know what to do. This wasn’t even battle strategy! Had they truly gone mad with fear? They were outnumbered, outgunned, were they just trying to commit suicide!

“Is the main gun ready to fire?” He asked, but the men at Tactical looked at him like it was the Admiral that had just lost his mind.

“And who would we shoot, Sir? We’ve got no clear line of fire!” The officer shouted.

Then it hit him.

Whoever had taken command of the Cornerian fleet wasn’t a coward and they were now taking the battle straight to him! Being so outnumbered... The safest place to park themselves was right where the Grand Gambit couldn’t fire! They were now swarming his fleet, and for them to engage the Cornerians, Scales would have no choice but to order his men to risk firing on each other. His anger let up for a moment, a wicked smile forming across his lips.

“So, the dogs have spines after all.” He nearly whispered to himself, but still loud enough for his fellow officers to overhear.

“Keep the main gun in standby, we’ll fire if the opportunity presents itself! Order all ships to launch their reserves, hold nothing back! The enemy wants us to pay a heavy price for victory today, so let’s teach them that Lord Andross always paid us well!” He shouted to Comms and returned to his chair. If this fight was to be won the old-fashioned way, then so be it!

He could crush them even without the Grand Gambit’s main weapon!

Meanwhile, in Engineering, the Grand Gambit’s dual reactor was still pumping out power to the twin batteries. Their combined light kept the chamber brightly lit and hot like a noontime desert. Technicians monitored the reactor and were working around the clock to keep the heat building up in the main gun from overloading the firing system.

“He needs to fire it again.” Boone announced to his team, studying the console and its many screens. The Kinetic Batteries were at full charge but with nowhere to send its energy. The Grand Gambit was not expending enough power, even with the shield arrays operating at full power.

“We need to throttle the output down, Doctor! Keeping it at 100% is dangerous!” An assistant shouted from his own console. Boone looked at him, then glared back down at his own displays before nodding.

He personally took the dial in hand and dropped the power coming from the reactor to 50%, a dramatic reduction, but not enough to keep the Gambit from firing with its current load. With that done there shouldn’t be any concern.

“Doctor, there’s no change to the batteries!” His assistant shouted again. Boone scowled and stalked over to his assistant, pushing him aside to examine the displays himself. There was no

change in the power output coming from the batteries! He returned to his original post and dialed the flow of power down to 0%, an extreme measure, but necessary in this instance.

He looked to his assistant who had resumed his post and was looking back at him, shaking his head fearfully. The batteries were no longer under his control, but why? Had they set in motion a reaction that they hadn't anticipated? Is this not the method the Krazoa would have used to initiate the batteries power generation?

"Someone, contact the bridge! Tell them that it is essential that they do not stop firing the main gun, they must use up the energy!" He shouted, and his team obeyed, one of his assistants rushing away to alert the bridge. He turned back to the consoles and stared at the displays. What would the Emperor have done, if not this?

<< Arwing 01, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

If hell was real, then it had come to find them, with the shining lights of gunfire and death exploding in all directions as the entirety of the Cornerian fleet wove itself into the Imperial line like a tapestry of blood. The crimson hulled ships of the Empire bled their laser fire in all directions, striking friend and foe alike as the madness of the battlefield broke down tactics and reason alike.

"Six! No, make it seven Imps on our tail!"

"Got two more, forward of my position, in pursuit!"

"Mayday! Too many tracking on me, need bac-!"

The radio was a blur of voices in Fox's ear as the fires of war illuminated his cockpit with every death, the girl in his lap shuddering along with the lights as the flash overhead and around them.

"Husky Squadron, we're going to dive in fast and hit that ship! None of our weapon's fire is making it through that forward shield, but the sides are vulnerable!" Fox shouted, the massive red weapon floating in the distance, it's green disc-like shield hovering in front of it, stopping in its tracks every weapon's system that was aimed at it.

His squadron all shouted in reply, and together they banked left and made their approach. They'd lost three of their pilots already, so they were only twelve strong with half their fighters in good condition. Slippy was reading between the lines to know what the plan was, his Arwing's radio out of action, but Falco was still doing fine and leading the frog along as they rejoin Fox and his squadron.

"So, what's our plan? How heavily armored is this thing?" Falco asked.

"No idea, but we'll figure it out as we fly!"

Ahead of them was an Imperial cruiser, already missing one of its gun turrets, and when the full squadron of Cornerian fighters descended upon it the rest of the ships' defense were lit up with

weapons fire. As they flew by the dying ship, Fox watched it tilt rudderless into space as explosions rocked its hull and lit up its interior.

A fresh wave of Imperial fighters responded in kind, attacking their left flank, and forced Fox and the others to break away and pick their targets. The aggression coming from the Imperials this close to their flagship was frightening, like they held no fear in their hearts as friend and foe alike died around them.

The Husky Squadron weren't the only allies making a break for the flagship. Gunfire and explosions threatened the massive ship from all angles with Cornerian battleships punching through recklessly to bridge the gap, making it impossible for the Empire to mount proper defenses. How do you fight an enemy who has lost its mind and broken through your front line, carving up your insides like a swallowed blade?

A friendly battleship fired its main gun, the massive laser colliding with the green shield protecting their target. The laser did nothing, the energy cracking against the shield and shattering in all directions before vanishing. The ship returned fire, pivoting several of its smaller guns, opening fire along with three other nearby vessels.

Fox watched the Cornerian ship cave under the pressure of four ships firing at once, its bow detonating, lights flickering across the ship as its power died. The lasers continued to fire on the dead vessel until the rest of it exploded, shrapnel scattering through space, some of it catching an Imperial vessel in its starboard side and triggering explosions within its hull.

"Push in while they're distracted!" Fox shouted to his squad, veering his Arwing off from its pursuit of an enemy fighter and making a desperate leap towards the enemy ship. Several fighters joined him while the rest were left behind, their sorties too hot to break free of.

The giant ship turned its guns toward Fox, and opened fire, the massive beams were too easy to read, and everyone spun their fighters aside as the laser bolts streaked past them. Several lights began to flash across the ship's hull as several circular ports began to screw open like the cap of a soda bottle, a cascade of missiles launching from the ship's newly revealed anti-air defenses.

The missiles spiraled towards them, the wave of munitions all but guaranteed to hit their slower moving targets. Fox placed his thumb on the trigger and fired a bomb, the ball of light launching from the nose of his Arwing and detonating ahead of him as the missiles came near. Most of the missiles were destroyed, but a few survived to emerge through the smoke and light of the detonation.

Fox slammed his boosters, spinning his Arwing as if he still had a working G-Diffuser. A missile flew over his cockpit, narrowly missing him. His radar was still reading the missile, and the others that followed it. Six missiles lived, which quickly dropped to four, then two, one. Nothing left.

"Husky 04 and 09 are down, they're down!" Someone shouted.

"All units, report! Whose still with me!" Fox shouted back.

What followed was a rapid roll call, telling Fox he had himself and four fighters with him. The rest were further behind him being swarmed by enemy fighters.

“That won’t be the last of their anti-air! They’ve gotta have more missiles than that!” Bill shouted, the dog holding steady at Fox’s side as the five fighters made their final approach towards the enemy flagship.

“Bill, you and Husky 03 plug their missile silos, the rest of you form up on me and we’ll target the first of those giant mirrors. That shields gotta be coming from those things!” He replied, several voices agreeing with him instantly, Bill and another pilot breaking away and changing their trajectory.

Fox gunned it, pushing his wounded Arwing to its best speed, watching the massive red ship rapidly grow in size before him as he brought it within range of his lasers. The ship responded, firing its lasers again, but missing the same as before. He squeezed his trigger, and the combined fire of three space fighters destroyed the first turret they came to. Pulling back on his flight stick they leveled off and found themselves flying across the hull of the ship. Fox turned his head, looking behind him and at the backside of the massive mechanical arm that held one of the mirrors aloft.

He turned his group around, evading more deadly laser fire, and brought the shield arm into his sights and fired, his wingmen doing the same.

Their laser fire did nothing, each shot hitting but was quickly deflected by the strength of the hull’s armor plating. He fired another bomb, ordering his wingmen to bail out of the way. The bomb met no resistance as it flew towards its target. When it hit, the explosion rocked the mirror, making the green shield shudder. When the light of the explosion faded Fox could see the arm had been heavily damaged, the arm only barely holding the mirror aloft as it tilted at a broken angle.

“Husky Squadron, the arms can be damaged by heavy ordinance! Lasers are useless! Bill, warn the fleet that their guns might be strong enough to take out those mirrors if they can score a direct hit!” Fox shouted, pulling away from the ship and banking around to make another pass.

Another volley of missiles was launched from their silos and Fox hesitated to use his bombs again. He only had two of those left! He fired off his lasers, his many wingmen doing the same as missiles were shot out of the sky, but not quickly enough. His boosters flared hot, and he dove between the cascade of missiles, explosions rocking his Arwing as the ordinance detonated behind him, his Arwing warning him that he was taking damage.

“Falco, you got enough bombs to help me take out those shields?” He shouted.

“Roger, just gimme a minute! Still pulling into your position, and Slippy’s all over the place without his radio!” The bird shouted back, Fox then seeing an explosion to his side where a Cornerian fighter used to be. He gritted his teeth and spun his Arwing back around and made a push for another pass at the shields.

His lasers couldn’t scratch this monster’s hull, but the turrets weren’t as well defended. He took out one missile port, then zipped past its corpse and readied his next bomb for the next shield arm, then launched it before veering off and away to safety. He didn’t watch the bomb hit its target, but the light reflecting in the glass told him it landed.

“It’s not out, Fox!” Bill shouted. Damn!

When he came back around, he saw two Cornerian fighters launching ballistic missiles. They weren't as powerful as the ordinance an Arwing carried, but the mirror he'd targeted was already heavily damaged. When the missiles struck the arm holding the mirror in place buckled and twisted, the mirror tilting to the side before something in the arm exploded, sending the entire structure to spin away from the ship's hull.

An enormous laser shot across the bow of the ship, narrowly missing Fox as it slammed into two Cornerian fighters. They were gone. Fox scanned the battlefield and saw an Imperial warship heading right for them to protect its flagship.

"Report, status!" Fox shouted.

"I'm here!" Bill's voice.

"Falco?" He asked.

"Yeah, yeah! And Slippy's on my wing!"

Was this all he had left? He thumbed his radio to an open Cornerian channel.

"Is there anyone close to the enemy flagship! We've got two of their shield mirrors destroyed, but we've taken heavy losses! We need backup!"

From somewhere in the distance a fresh laser lanced through space, slamming into the side of the Imperial ship that was heading their way. A Cornerian warship was now joining the fray. Beneath Fox the massive flagship was turning its guns towards the newcomer, its weapons launching volley after volley at the distance vessel.

Fox turned himself around, the girl clutching at his vest as she hung on through the twist and turns of his violent piloting. He took aim at the nearest gun turret and opened fire. A dozen direct hits landed, and the turret began to buckle, its interior lighting up with fire before detonation across the ship's hull.

"Whoever is in command of that warship needs to do something!" Fox shouted, angrily banking hard to the side to avoid another desperate volley of missiles.

<< E.B.S. Grand Gambit, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

"What do they mean?" Scales shouted at his Comms officer in a rage, responding to a plea from Engineering.

An explosion made the bridge quake beneath their feet with warning sirens signaling that more damage had been done to the ship. They were slowly losing their ability to fight back as the fighter squadron dogging their vessel continued to target their shields.

"We've just lost Shield Array 03!"

“Comms!” Scales shouted again over the flurry of voices on the bridge.

“Sir, they’re saying we can’t stop shooting the main gun, that we need to vent the excess power coming from the batteries. I don’t know anything more than that, Sir!” He shouted back, his hand gripping tight to his headset as he held it half on and half off his head as he tried to relay information back and forth across the battlefield.

Scales wiped his brow with his sleeve and stalked toward Tactical and demanded a report on all nearby targets. When he saw the display, he balked. There were so damn many of them! The battlefield was chaotic with ships everywhere, friend and foe alike. Comms was struggling to relay his commands with how quickly things were changing by the second.

And half of the Gambit’s arrays had been destroyed! What good was his impenetrable shield if it only protected from the front? This wasn’t how the Gambit had been designed to wage war! It was a mobile artillery unit to be used at range, and now he was paying the price for failing to maintain distance between his forces and the enemy. He gritted his teeth in anger.

And now there was no way he could open fire with the main gun in a battlefield as densely packed as this. It was then that an explosion hit the Grand Gambit’s starboard side, rocking the ship, and sending half the bridge tumbling to the floor, Scales included.

He heard a ringing in his ears as he lifted himself off the floor. The doctor had rushed to his side, helping pull him upright, and as the ringing subsided, he could hear Tactical shouting that they’d been struck on the starboard side from an enemy warship.

“Damage to deck three, sealing off the starboard passageways!”

“No casualties, but they took out another of our turrets! We’re naked on the starboard side!”

“Admiral, the Harbinger is attempting to intercept the ship that just attacked us!”

Scales shook himself off, the pain in his ribs had roared back to life as if the wound had been made anew, forcing him looking down to see the liquid epoxy seal had been pulled loose at the edges of his ribs, and there was fresh blood leaking down his side.

“Admiral, we need to retreat your wound.” The doctor approached him from behind.

“Shut up!” Scales snarled at the man before pivoting on his heel to turn away, only to find his vision rotating before him as fresh pain lanced through him nearly leaving him to pass out. He dropped to a knee but shoved himself upright with the doctor still behind him with hands out as if to render aid. Scales turned his head to the doctor and forced the man to wither under his gaze.

When the doctor had backed off Scales returned to Tactical and began issuing orders to pivot the Grand Gambit so as to protect its wounded side, and to evacuate all nonessential personnel from the ship’s starboard side. Was Grand Gambit’s hull so weak that he needed to fear one Cornerian ship, he raged!

“Sir, Engineering is still insisting that we fire the main gun!” Another officer told him, a sense of urgency growing in the man’s voice. Scales looked up from Tactical and out at the battlefield sprawled out around him, and the many potential targets he had before his eyes. Every ship he could destroy was locked in battle with two or three of his own ships.

“And how exactly are we to fire the main gun without slaughtering our own forces!” He snarled back.

<< C.A.S. Eversor, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

“Captain, we’ve got five minutes on shields, tops! Engineering can’t keep them online any longer than that!”

“I need it to last longer than that, dammit!” The Doberman snarled; the ship then suddenly rocked beneath his feet as another volley of laser fire erupted across the Eversor’s shields. Captain Friedrich’s vessel had been at the very front of their advance into the enemy’s lines, and now as his ship shuddered with every impact against its shields, he resisted the urge to feel fear.

Right dead ahead of them was their target! The enormity of the Imperial flagship was looming ahead of them, and they were being dogged by pesky flies, and there was a pissant battleship in their way! They’d already punched one hole into its side, but now they were going to give it another!

“Another warship approaching from above! Brace fo-“ his officer couldn’t finish his sentence before they were again rocked back by another hard hit across their shields.

“Fire!” He shouted, and the forward guns of his ship lashed out at the ship ahead of them, striking into its injured side, tearing through what remained of its hull. The ship began to sag in the middle as it vented its guts out into space, the ship’s interior an echoing mess of fire and explosions as the ship’s internal structure collapsed.

His crew cheered, but the flagship was still ahead of them, their real target.

“What’s that topside ship doing!” The Captain shouted.

“It’s maintaining its approach! Terrier Squadron is asking if they need to break off their attack and return to base!”

“No! They are to not abandon their target! The flagship is their only priority, not us!”

As his communications officer relayed that command to what remained of his Terrier Squadron, the Captain focused again on the battlefield around him. He had far too few allies around the Eversor, but there was a growing swarm of fighters moving onto the Imperial flagship. What had been a small flame at first, was now a raging inferno.

“Captain, we’re getting a request from the Star Fox Team!”

“Which is?” He shouted just as the ship rocked again under weapons fire. The Empire did not take kindly to losing one of their own and now there were at least two battleships opening fire on the Eversor. It was only by the good grace of his ship’s shields that they could weather this storm. He’d already lost his two escorting cruisers...

“They want us to help destroy the flagship’s shields!”

They were slowly closing the gap between them and the Imperial flagship, and in front of it Captain Friedrich could see the massive disc of green energy. The field of energy was stopping everything that was fired at it and protected the bow of the ship which doubled as the barrel for the ship’s main cannon.

“Push us forward then! This doesn’t change our target, or our objective! Coordinate with the Squadron to determine where our cannon fire needs to go!” He shouted back, returning to his chair, and continuing the fight from his seat as the hull shuddered around him as his shields endured yet another barrage.

<< Arwing 01, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

“We’ve got one warship coming to assist, and about ten extra fighters!” Bill shouted.

Fox was relieved to hear that, and The Great Fox was now on its own approach vector as it punched through the enemy lines to make for the Imperial flagship. He struggled to maintain the battlefield in his head, each fighter, each ship, like a chess piece on the board.

As the pieces all moved, he plotted what he should next do, who he should next reach out to, to give an order, and which pieces needed knocking over next. Despite losing half its shield generators, and most of its armaments the flagship wasn’t faltering! He thumbed his flight stick and readied a bomb but hesitated to press the button. It was his last one, and he feared he might need it later.

Falco and Slippy still had munitions of their own, and they were already here, and then with The Great Fox backing them up from behind they’d have some long-range artillery to rely on.

Two allied warships and... more than a dozen fighters. This had to be enough to kill this ship!

“Angry.” The girl whispered, her hand squeezing at his collar as she clung to him.

“What?” He asked, jerking the flight stick to the side and rolling his Arwing to the right as an enemy fighter shot across his ship. The light of laser fire illuminated the interior of his cockpit for a moment, turning them both pink before the darkness of space returned and Fox could see clearly ahead of him again. He tapped his foot on the peddle and triggered his boosters, sending his Arwing, and his new purser through a chase around the underside of the flagship’s hull.

The ship was so huge it wasn’t a quick journey, and the enemy fighter had a slight speed advantage over his Arwing’s limping engine.

“I can hear a voice.” Krystal tried to say, her voice coming out too dry. She felt dehydrated after all these hours of having nothing to sustain her, but the voice she could hear over all the others was too loud, and too familiar, for her to ignore, and too important for Krystal to not say something.

“Yeah?” Fox replied, distracted, jerking back on the flight stick just as he cleared the other side of the ship, rolling his Arwing up and into a fake U turn that fooled his pursuer into pulling his own ship into a full Immelmann, his fighter tipping upside down before the pilot spun himself right-side up to match the orientation of the flagship.

Seeing this, Fox, now flying vertically, finished his turn, and hit his boosters a second time. With his speed now momentarily faster than his prey he completed his own delayed Immelmann and fell into line behind his target while holding down the trigger of his lasers. As soon as he had a lock, he let the charged bolt fly. The enemy pilot tried to bank left to avoid the shot, but as it chased him Fox jerked his own fighter to the side and fired leading shots ahead of him.

Laser fire struck the fighter’s port side right before the charged shot plowed into its stern killing it swiftly. Krystal shuddered, feeling the sudden painful voice of another life just before it vanished.

“I think it’s him!” She choked out, breathing through her mouth as she struggled to keep it together. So many people were dying all around her! She could hear Fox’s confusion, he didn’t know who ‘he’ was, but she had to tell him. “The Admiral! The big man that attacked you, he’s on this ship!”

“Well, that would sense!” He replied, his thoughts telling her more than his voice could. Of course, the enemy leader would be on their flagship, and she almost felt silly herself.

“He’s angry! He- He can’t find anything to shoot!” She explained, her ability to hear voices was limited, but that single powerful voice was so familiar to her that it sang louder than all the others. She could still see his face in her mind from when he’d looked down at her in the Central Chamber, when she’d spat at him, and then again when he’d been glaring down at Fox as he tried beating him senseless on the floor.

There was so much growing anger and incredible pain in this man’s voice. With every word his mind spoke it echoed with a tremor of something terrible, like a dam was holding something back but threatened to break at any moment.

“Then my idea is working!” Fox replied with triumph, knowing that with the battlefield in such a state as it was now that there were no clean targets for the flagship to aim at. Krystal, too, felt relief from this, but that terrible something being held back in the Admiral filled her with fear. Today was the first day in her life that she’d ever tasted desperation on her lips, and now she felt that same flavor coming from within that enormous ship.

There were a handful of smaller voices whose words she couldn’t hear, but they were energetic and filled with fear, too. There were people inside that ship desperate to stop something, but she didn’t know what it was.

<< E.B.S. Grand Gambit, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

The sweat was now pouring down Dr. Boone’s face as he and his team desperately tried to find a solution to the growing threat that spun before them. The twin eyes of the spider that had so

captivated the doctor now left him frightened. They could not devise a way to shunt power from the batteries to stop them from overloading!

Everything they had done had been by Lord Andross' design! His notes were clear, and the schematics were all crafted by his own hand, and yet what could they have missed? Was there a key element they had overlooked in his research, or could the Emperor himself not have foreseen this as a possibility? Surely not!

"The shields are pulling even less power now! Arrays 01 and 03 are offline, and 02 is damaged and may soon fail!" One of his assistants shouted from his console, and the doctor quickly moved to his side to check the readouts. The shield arrays had been one of the two largest sources of power drain with the other being the rest of the ship's systems! The Grand Gambit was suffering nonfatal damage all across its hull with a number of its defense systems being put offline by the Cornerians.

With every blow they endured, no matter how small it might have been, the power being pulled away from the Kinetic Batteries grew ever smaller, and with that the twin crystals spun ever faster. Their brilliant glow was too great to look at now without eye protection, and the ambient heat was skyrocketing within the confines of engineering. Technicians were working nonstop to try and devise a means of using heatsinks to keep the temperature from rising any higher, but it appeared that a terrifying inevitability was looming before him.

Why was the Admiral not firing the ship's main weapon? That was the thing; the only thing, that could save them now. He must fire the cannon!

<< C.A.S. Eversor, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Meanwhile, the Eversor's shields had finally failed, and the Imperial warship that lay ahead of them felt out of reach even though they'd come so close.

An explosion on the ship's port side threw the crew to the floor on every deck of the Eversor, sending them scrambling back to their feet as warning sirens echoed through the corridors with red light filtering through every fixture as their vessel began suffering critical failures.

The ship was struck again in the same spot.

"We've lost contact with Deck 2! Dead air!"

"Captain, Engineering reports the reactor is going to fail!"

"Captain, I've just lost power to the forward guns!"

"Captain!"

Captain Friedrich picked himself up and held tight to the side of his chair as he glared out at the Imperial flagship, which was just out of reach. His ship was going to die, and his teeth clenched painfully.

“Order the crew to evacuate! All hands are to board the nearest escape pod and...”

Where could they escape to that wasn't a warzone?

“Pray that you all make it home.” He finished his sentence, and the officer standing now at the Communication console turned to look at him, then back to his console and began to broadcast the command to evacuate across the ship, including the Captain's last words.

The Doberman was too proud to flee with his crew and approached his Helmsman and told him he was relieved of duty and was to evacuate.

“But Sir...”

“Evacuate! Everyone on the bridge evac now!” He shouted at everyone on the bridge, including the officer at Comms. He gave them all a glare and the men slowly began to move from their posts just as another hit landed on their side, knocking everyone to the floor. The Captain grabbed the edge of the console and pulled himself upright, reaching up to his face to find that he'd split his lip open on the way down.

“Everyone out!” He shouted again, and the crew began to scramble, making their way off the bridge and to the executive escape pod mounted behind the rear of the bridge.

Standing once more at the Helm of his ship he set the controls to manual and began to punch the engines to their fullest, hoping that everyone in Engineering had done their due diligence and made it to the escape pods. This console couldn't tell him if pods were being jettisoned, but he knew his crew was well trained in emergency protocol.

The Eversor would die today, but it would do so proudly! The Captain set his trajectory, and let the ship burn at full thrust with the flagship as his target. He would personally guide the ship to its final resting place.

<< Arwing 01, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

“Fox!” she shouted in fear as a powerful laser lanced overhead, blinding her with its light. Fox jerked the flight stick and pulled them away from danger, the audio from his headset just barely audible over his heavy breathing. She watched him from below, still clinging to him even as the pain in her side grew ever stronger. Krystal was in so much pain, and she kept feeling lightheaded as the emotions of the battlefield blended with her own suffering, leaving her feeling weak and threatening to knock her unconscious.

But she couldn't close her eyes now! Something terrible was going to happen!

“Dammit!” Fox shouted, and she felt him bank his Arwing hard to the left. She couldn't see clearly out of the cockpit like he could, but something new was happening around them.

“What is it doing?” He asked, and she could hear the words in his head, too. There was a ship, one of their own, flying straight at the big ship they were all trying to destroy.

She couldn't feel this other ship, or who was on it, but within Fox she felt a terrible anger and desperation. Outside the Arwing the fighting had reached a new intensity. The Great Fox was now within range of the Grand Gambit, but it had approached from the flagship's front, and its forward shields were still online. They'd yet to cripple the last two arrays!

"A damn suicide run!" Fox shouted, the information streaming into his ear telling him everything he needed to know. The ship that had come in for the rescue was going down, and in its death throes the Captain of the ship was going to use it as a battering ram!

He couldn't hesitate any longer and spun his Arwing back around until the flagship was again within his sights with its forward shields in view. They'd damaged one of the arrays already, but he'd been saving his last bomb, afraid to use it, but now it was too late! He could have done more sooner, and now another of their ships was going to sink!

Two enemy fighters put their sights on him as he made his approach, but he handled them, and launched his last bomb. He couldn't afford to watch it hit its target and spun his ship out of harm's way as laser fire erupted all around him. They were outnumbered two to one now even with the arrival of the Terrier Squadron!

"Did you get it!" Falco shouted over his radio. Fox didn't know!

"Woo hoo!" Another voice shouted, but Fox couldn't tell if it was Bill's or another canine from Terrier. The open channel between them was a flurry of communications, updates, reports, roll calls, warnings, and may days. The stream of consciousness from a dozen other pilots was filling his ears and keeping him updated, and he now knew that his bomb had hit its target and the shield had flickered again. The overlapping layers of energy were failing one by one as they took each arm of the array down.

"Last one!" He shouted into his headset.

Fox didn't want to leave anything to chance. If Andross went through all the trouble of designing shields to protect the front of the ship, then he wasn't going to gamble that he could destroy it by attacking it from its sides. They'd already heavily damaged it, but the ship wasn't dying even as they left scorch marks and craters all over its surface!

He felt a hand grab at his wrist and push, a laser flashing over the cockpit just as he was about to pull back on his flight stick. Fox looked down at the girl, who'd let go of his shirt and was now holding her hand on his wrist. She looked terrible, but if her mind reading was working, then that meant she could help in some small way. Like keeping him from tipping his nose up into enemy fire.

A new flurry of activity exploded over the radio as the Eversor began to suffer critical failure. He pulled his ship around and watched as the ship, smaller than the Imperial flagship, coasted forward at great speed towards the enemy. Its hull was heavily damaged, leaking debris into the space around it as it carried out its last will. The now dead ship bore a deep wound where the bridge had once been, where Imperial forces had desperately tried to stop its advance.

Behind him the flagship was beginning to shift, making an obvious maneuver to avoid a collision.

"Dammit!" He shouted, knowing that it'd miss.

What was left of the Eversor flew past him, its corpse barreling towards the enemy. The underside of the ship collided with the enemy's bow, but only just. It could only scrape across the other ship's hull as it glided by. Fox thumbed his radio to contact The Great Fox.

"ROB! Fire at the Eversor! Fire at it!" He screamed.

Off in the distance a pair of twin lasers flashed, and their payload streaked through space to hit its target. The Eversor was struck in the middle as it was about to clear the Imperial ship, and something ruptured in its middle. The ship detonated, sending shrapnel and debris scattering through space to rip and tear at the Imperial flagship's tough exterior.

As Fox watched, hoping that the destruction had been enough, the final shield array began to flicker. Krystal pulled at his wrist.

"No!" She screamed, her voice cracking.

"What? What is it!" He asked her, the enormous ship began to move again, crawling out from beneath the ruined corpse of the Eversor.

"He wants to fire it again! He's looking at your ship!" She cried.

His ship? The flagship wasn't pointed at his Arwing.

"The Great Fox!" She cried again, tugging at his hand. He yanked the flight stick to the side and spun his Arwing around towards The Great Fox's position. The two ships were still a distance apart, but well within each other's firing range, but the last shield array was still online! All the Eversor had done was make it flicker!

He hit his boosters and flew towards the array, shouting on an open channel for everyone to fire at the array with anything they had left. Laser fire that had previously been streaking across space in every direction began to stop, then began again in a new direction as pilots all began to heed his call, drawing their fire towards the array.

The laser fire wasn't going to cut it! Fox added his own lasers to the mix, but the array's armor was too tough, even if damaged! He didn't know what to do, the girl clinging tight to his arm as he struggled to think of a solution.

Then the shield shut off on its own.

"What?" He asked out loud as cheers erupted on the open channel.

"No, no!" Krystal began to weep, almost hysterical, clawing at his chest with her hand desperately as she recoiled from the view ahead of them. The array began to move, rotating backwards and out of the way before locking into a new position. The barrel was now exposed, and a bright light began to shine out from the front of the ship.

"He's going to shoot it!" She sobbed, jerking at his vest as she wailed.

“ROB, fire again! Fire at the ship! Fire at the ship, ROB!” He cried out, his desperation matching the girl’s in lock step. The flagship below them grew even brighter, with nearby ships caught in its firing path losing control before exploding from the incredible heat of that fearsome light.

Then The Great Fox struck back.

His ship fired, its powerful twin lasers finding purchase on the flagship, piercing right down the middle of the main gun’s barrel! The light of green lasers blended with the searing white of the main gun, then an explosion erupted from deep within the ship as the light flickered and faded. More cheering erupted over the radio as his pilots celebrated. Fox breathed a sigh of relief, the tightness in his chest letting go at last as the fear that had gripped him faded along with that terrible light.

“No!” Krystal shouted, yanking at his arm again, desperately trying to make him pull his flight stick to the side.

“What’s the matter!” He shouted back at her, yanking himself from her grip only for her to grab tight to him again.

“We have to run!” She screamed, Fox looking down to see her looking back at him with a look of horror that left him pale.

<< E.B.S. Grand Gambit, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Admiral Scales spit a mouthful of blood out onto the floor as he picked himself up again, his wound having been torn back open, and the whole side of his uniform was now soaked through with blood. He couldn’t hear anything over the ringing in his ears, then hands came to grab him from his side. He turned his head and saw the doctor trying to pull him away, but he yanked his arm free and shoved the man back. The pain ripping through his body was unlike anything he’d ever felt.

The bridge around him was in a state of chaos, his officers shouting at each other, shouting to him, but he still couldn’t hear anything but a muffled silence. The red lights of danger were now active on the bridge, casting everything in a crimson hue of death. When the doctor returned to his side, the ape had brought a soldier with him.

“Sir!” The soldier shouted; fear etched onto his face as he warily approached his commanding officer. The ringing began to fade, the sound of the bridge around him replacing it. What he found was that his ship appeared to be dying. Warning klaxons were screaming at the crew, and they were screaming at each other to evacuate the ship.

“Status report!” Scales shouted.

“Sir, we have to abandon ship!” The soldier next to him replied, the doctor again trying to take the Admiral by the arm, but he ripped it away.

“No! Why didn’t the gun fire!” He jerked himself back to Tactical, saw that no one was posted there. Where were his officers! What now remained of the bridge crew appeared to be standing at Comms, barking orders elsewhere. Even his Helmsman had abandoned his post!

“The weapon is disabled, Sir! We were shot inside the barrel before it could fire!” The doctor shouted back in reply, forcing himself between Scales at the rest of the bridge, putting his hands on his chest and trying to push him back towards the rear exit.

“Admiral, we need to get you to one of the shuttles!” The soldier behind him pleaded. Scales looked back to him, then back towards the front of the bridge, at the carnage that sat in space around his ship. No.

No!

The Grand Gambit could not possibly be defeated!

He shoved the doctor aside and stumbled his way back to Tactical. He smashed several buttons, desperate to reactivate the main gun, before grabbing the lever that would fire it. He yanked it down, but nothing happened.

“Sir, please!” A voice from behind. He yanked the lever up and down, his frustration boiling into anger as the gun refused to fire. He looked up at the window in front of him as a hand grabbed him by the arm. Somewhere in the distance was The Great Fox! He had them in his sights, he’d almost had them!

“Dammit!” He screamed at the window, and at everything beyond it.

Something beneath him detonated within the ship, shaking the bridge, and knocking everyone that remained to the floor. Deep in the ship, Engineering had already been evacuated. Every attempt to deactivate the twin Kinetic Batteries had failed, and they were now spinning faster than 50,000 rpms each. Together they produced a light far brighter than a star that scorched the interior of the chamber, incinerating everything that wasn’t made of metal, and now even the metal began to give, pouring like red sludge off the ceilings and walls as the catwalks collapsed to the floor below them like molten rain.

The Grand Gambit’s main gun was dead, the internal damage to its barrel too extensive to allow the weapon to fire again. Even so, the light from within Engineering began to bleed out through the ship until the Gambit’s bow began to glow white once more.

As the Admiral staggered to his feet, clawing his way up to brace himself against the Tactical console, he saw the white light emanating from the front of his ship.

“Yes!” He shouted in triumph, blood spitting from his mouth as he watched with a manic grin, his teeth stained with blood.

“Bathe them all in fire!” He shouted and grabbed the lever again and pulled it.

Though nothing happened, the white light grew brighter still. The soldier had already fled, leaving the Admiral and the doctor alone on the bridge. Looking to the Admiral, then at the destruction around him, the doctor too fled the bridge.

The light grew brighter, and then there was a sudden and sharp increase in temperature. The bridge began to cook, the flesh of the Admiral's hand was scorched by the lever, forcing him to rip it off, bits of his flesh being left behind as the flooring began to melt through the soles of his boots.

Admiral Scales had already tasted pain today, but what he experienced now was something different. As his ship died around him, he bore witness to his own oblivion as the twin eyes of the spider finally began to rupture, tearing the ship apart and scattering the Admiral's corpse into ash as the ship's hull was torn asunder from the inside.

The Grand Gambit had fallen, and with it, the rest would surely follow.

<< Arwing 01, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Krystal pleaded with Fox to go faster, to get as far away as he could! Fox couldn't have held a tighter grip on the flight stick as his foot pumped the pedal, forcing his boosters to push his Arwing, and its engine, to its limit. Warning lights were flashing on his console, klaxons crying out as the engines screamed behind them.

"Please, we have to go faster!" She cried.

"Everyone, evacuate! Get away from that ship, now! Get as far away as possible!" Fox shouted into his headset, using an open channel that everyone could hear, even the Empire.

Behind them the enemy's flagship was glowing bright, as if a new star had formed just outside Saurian orbit, consuming the vessel until there was nothing left. Further still, the light was advancing, incinerating everything it touched, everything that had failed to escape the now rapidly expanding ground zero of the flagship's destruction.

Fox knew that if that ship blew up just as the Force Point Temple had, then everything around it would be good as gone! A new warning appeared on his console, telling him that he was risking a critical engine failure if he didn't stop firing his boosters, but what choice did he have?

As the light behind them grew brighter still his Arwing began to shudder, the lack of any shielding leaving it fully exposed to the intense heat ripping through space around him. More sirens, and more lights, began to appear on his console.

Krystal, wracked with pain, felt the chorus of voices around her thinning, hundreds upon hundreds of people dying in sharp moments of agony as the light consumed more of the battlefield.

Suddenly, the Arwing lurched, and the debris floating in space around them began to fly past them as if it was all being yanked through space by a powerful force. Fox fought against it, gripping tighter to the flight stick as his ship began to vibrate and rattle. The glass of the cockpit began to crack, new sirens screaming of even greater danger!

His engines failed, the whole console going red with system failures. The space around them was being consumed by that terrible light as his Arwing was pulled backwards, spinning out of

control. Krystal wept as she put out her hand to embrace the man who had carried her this far, and in return he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight as their ship was enveloped with light, and then everything went dark.

Chapter 11//ASCENSION

<< Somewhere in Saurian Orbit >>

It was cold. Really cold.

White lines were in front of him, like a spider's web, wrapping Fox up in a cocoon of biting ice. With each breath he drew he knew it might be his last, and the shaking of his hands wouldn't stop. The glass of his cockpit was cracked from corner to corner, slowly bleeding out what little oxygen he had left, and without power his ship could no longer keep him warm.

The girl.

He held her unconscious body in his arms, holding the plastic mask to her face so that she might live longer than he would, the mask feeding her the emergency reserve of oxygen stored behind his seat.

Looking out past the spider's web of cracks in the glass he saw the grim fate of many. Wreckages of fighters and warships littered the space around him, and then his hands stopped shaking. He was too weak for even hypothermia to give him the jitters. He'd lose consciousness soon.

Maybe the girl would make it. She'd been through enough.

"I didn't see you this time." He mouthed the words as his vision began to fade. This time, there had been no voice to guide him to safety as death chased him down in his Arwing. His father's voice had abandoned him. Was it because he was meant to meet him face to face this time, at the very end?

As he faded, something popped, but he couldn't see anymore. He lost consciousness as his cockpit was ejected from the wreckage of his Arwing. A pair of canines in space suits had him now, but he was no longer aware that help had finally arrived as a fleet of ships slowly combed the wreckages of friend and foe alike in search of any survivors, of which there were unfortunately far too few.

<< C.A.S. Ferratus, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

In thirty minutes, the clock would mark the twenty fourth hour since he'd been recovered from the battlefield. The C.A.S. Ferratus, along with the rest of the Cornerian 2nd Fleet, had arrived only a half hour past the destruction of the Imperial flagship, whose identity had now been confirmed as the Grand Gambit. A total of forty-seven POWs had been brought into custody for questioning and were presently being held in the Ferratus' brig under twenty-four-hour guard, as well as being placed under suicide watch.

Most of the past day had been spent asleep, with Fox gliding in and out of consciousness as nurses checked his vitals, fed him medication, his body struggling to cope with everything it'd been put through.

When he finally regained consciousness, and could actually keep his eyes open, he at last felt like he was awake.

The infirmary on the Ferratus was impressive. It was the largest ship in the fleet, having only been commissioned after the war's end. It was also General Pepper's personal flagship. When Fox sat upright in his bed, fingers tugging curiously at the blue paper gown he'd been changed into, a male nurse rushed to his side.

"Take it easy, you've been through a lot, Sir." The canine said, his voice as gentle as a nurse's should be, but Fox waved him off.

"Been through worse. I feel alright." He replied, but it was a white lie. He still felt aches and pains, but that was to be expected considering what he'd endured.

The nurse pulled out a small flashlight and instructed Fox to follow the light as he shined it in his eyes. He began a series of other routine tests, checking his vitals and making sure Fox was fit enough to be sitting upright at all.

"What's happened?" Fox asked.

The nurse paused, choosing his words carefully.

"I've heard that the search and rescue operation is still ongoing, but they haven't brought anyone new to Medical in over two hours. If there's anyone else out there, they're running out of time." He replied.

"I take it we won?"

"That depends on what your definition of winning is, Sir. The casualties are... very high." The nurse replied. Fox nodded.

"I'd like to see the rest of my team. Can I get clearance to move about Medical?" He asked, not even knowing if his team still existed.

"You're not in as bad a shape as you were when you first came in, Mr. McCloud. I'll talk to Dr Roscoe, forwarding him your request."

"Thank you." He replied.

The room he was in wasn't private. Just a three walled cubicle filled with the kind of medical equipment you'd expect of a hospital, complete with a fabric curtain acting as the fourth wall you'd enter in from. Without waiting for permission, he slid his legs off the bed and hopped to the floor, the cool steel making him shiver, but it helped wake him up.

His knee wasn't aching as bad as it had been before, and he pulled aside the paper gown and found that the injury he'd taken to the knee had been given proper stitches and a bandage, replacing the primitive medicines the EarthWalker tribe had treated him with. He still had a

headache, his fingers reaching up to feel the small lumps on his scalp from where he'd taken a beating from that lizard. Those were going to smart for the next couple of days.

Scanning the room, he found the remains of his uniform folded onto a small metal table. It looked like someone had taken the time to clean them but didn't bother repairing them. His pants still had the tear in the side where that arrow had hit him. He pulled the curtain shut and changed out of his gown and into his uniform, finding his boots on the floor by the end of the bed. At least they were kind enough to leave his clothing.

The nurse returned, not acting surprised that his patient had changed into something more comfortable.

"Dr Roscoe gives his permission to move about Medical, Sir. He requests that you do not leave, please. He still needs to review the results of your CT scan."

"I promise not to wander far. Where is my team?"

The nurse beckoned him to follow, and Fox let the dog lead the way, following him out of his cubicle and down the corridor. He passed by more than dozens of other patients, all pilots and sailors, and he wasn't even being given a tour of the whole infirmary. There were more corridors than this. The number of injuries he saw was depressing. So many good men knocked right on their asses and worse.

"Here, Mr. McCloud." The nurse said, moving to a curtain and pulling it aside and revealing a pair of men standing next to a bed.

Fox's heart felt lighter seeing Slippy and Falco not only safe, but for seeing them at all for the first time in more than two days. His smile faded when the two men turned their attention to him with a figure laying in the bed behind them.

"Fox!" Slippy shouted, rushing to greet him, and coming in for a hug. Falco looked at him with his usual wry humor, and stepped away from the bed to join Slippy, but not with a hug but a wing on the shoulder.

Fox's eyes were glued on the man lying in bed. It was Peppy.

He broke free of his wingmen and rushed to the bed, his light heart growing heavier again as he watched the elderly rabbit breathing deeply, an oxygen mask affixed to his face, tubes and wires stuck to him. A machine was next to the bed reading off all kinds of medical nonsense Fox didn't know how to decipher.

"He's alright, Fox." Falco said, coming up from behind him and putting a hand back on his shoulder.

"The doctor says he's in bad shape, but he'll get better." Slippy added, coming around to Fox's opposite side.

"I thought he was dead." Fox whispered, his grief returning, him feeling like it was almost too good to be true.

“He almost didn’t make it. His radio was out, got knocked offline just like Slippy’s when he ejected his cockpit from his Arwing so he couldn’t call for help. He was just floating in space. It’s almost a miracle. If he hadn’t bit the dust where had then that big explosion would have gotten him.” Falco added.

“When rescue found him, he’d passed out from his injuries. They think that’s the only reason he didn’t die of asphyxiation. Being knocked out kept his breathing slow, didn’t use up as much air.” Falco continued, and Fox kept listening as he watched the elderly man sleep.

He reached up to run a hand across his cheek and his wingmen didn’t say anything as Fox regained his composure. He found Peppy’s hand and squeezed it, the gratitude he felt for whoever spotted him was overwhelming.

“First good news I’ve heard in 24 hours.”

“The rest of the news you’ll be getting is a mixed bag. Get ready for some bittersweet dessert.” Falco replied.

“And what’s that?” Fox asked, reluctantly pulling his hand away from the bed before turning to face his companions.

“They don’t know where the Empire went. That big ass explosion wiped out dozens of ships, but it didn’t get everyone. Every Imperial ship that wasn’t caught in the explosion bailed out, and none of us were in any condition to pursue them.”

“But they’re supposed to have already started sending out recon teams to start looking.” Slippy added.

Fox reached up and rubbed the spot between his eyes. If the Empire was capable of hiding themselves away for eight years, then they’d just go right back to doing what they’re clearly very good at. There were so many places to hide ships in the Lylat System that a handful of recon teams wasn’t going to be enough. It’d take a staggering effort to track down every last trace of the Empire.

“It’s a start.” Fox replied, unimpressed.

A nurse entered, asking them to make room for him, and the three men stepped aside to let the nurse do his job in caring for Peppy. Fox looked at his wingmen and was glad that they at least were spared the worst of it. Fox had taken his share of injuries, but looking back at Peppy, he knew many others had suffered far worse.

Then there was the girl!

He suddenly thought of her, the teenager! Krystal was her name.

“I want to go check on another patient.” He told the two men and stepped out of Peppy’s cubicle while they waited for the nurse to finish checking his patient.

It took a moment for Fox to get the attention of a nurse who could stop and help him. The infirmary was so large he’d have to search every room to find her, and he didn’t want to harass

men for directions who didn't deserve it. He was finally directed to a room in the far corner of Medical, which was apparently where they'd decided to board any injured civilians.

When he approached the small cubicle that housed the girl, she was already looking in his direction as he stepped into view, like she'd been watching him approach from the start.

"How're you doing?" He asked.

The girl smiled, but the gesture was weak. She looked exhausted.

"I'm ok. I learned they don't do anything for broken ribs. I just have to let them heal on their own." She replied, her voice very quiet.

"Got you on painkillers?"

He approached her bed and put his hands on the plastic railing. The girl was lying flat with an IV drip in her arm, dressed in a blue gown like all the other patients. Fox could see it in her face that she was suffering, looking like death, the grey under her eyes he'd first seen in his Arwing had gotten worse.

"Yes. I'm just really tired, and..." She started but stopped to take in a difficult breath.

"And?"

"I can still hear everything." She replied, her voice beginning to crack as she shut her eyes, Fox watching the girl as she struggled to contain her tears.

"Like on Sauria? And my Arwing?" He asked.

She nodded.

"There are so many people that are hurt." Her lip was beginning to tremble, but she controlled herself. "And they're frightened. Everyone is afraid."

He nodded back. There were a lot of reasons to be afraid now.

"It's hard to sort through the voices. What happened?" She asked, finding renewed strength from somewhere. Fox could only shake his head.

"Hard to say. There was the explosion, and a lot of ships were lost. Ours and theirs. Whatever was left of the Empire fled, and the military has sent out some search teams to look for them. I don't think they'll find anything."

She shut her eyes and he watched her face, the way she set her jaw and struggled to contain all the emotions she had roiling inside her. How long had she been conscious, he wondered? Was she just laying here listening to all the pain and suffering around her, carrying the combined weight of every heavy heart and tortured spirit?

He didn't envy her at all, lying trapped in her own personal hell.

“Don’t say that.” She said, her voice cracking as she battled her emotions. He should have known better that she could hear his thoughts, especially this close.

“I’m sorry.” He replied.

“How are you parents?” He changed the subject. “The rest of your colleagues?”

It took a moment, but she took in a deep and quiet breath, regaining control of herself once more even as her eyes looked like the water works were about to begin at any moment.

“They’re doing alright. When they were found they were all cold. Doctors said some had hypothermia and frostbite, but they’ll get better. My parents are safe. I haven’t gotten to see them yet, but I can feel them somewhere on the ship.”

“That’s good!” He told her with some cheer, hoping to uplift the mood. “I’m sure they’re keeping everyone that’s not a patient outside while everyone recovers. There’s a lot of people in the infirmary and I bet the doctors don’t want to be bothered while they work.”

For the first time she lifted her hand from the bed, weak as she seemed to be, and reached out to touch his hand.

“Is he ok?” She asked.

Fox didn’t reply, uncertain as to who ‘he’ was.

“Your father.” She replied.

He froze, remembering his father, his face, his voice. In his confusion he didn’t know what to say to the girl.

“No... He’s not your father, but you still care about him.” Krystal replied to his stunned silence.

Peppy was like a father, wasn’t he?

“He’s unconscious now, but we’re told he’ll recover. He took some bad injuries during the fighting. Thought he’d died.” He replied.

“I hope he’s ok, Mr. McCloud.”

He reached up and rubbed a thumb under one eye, smiling now after hearing a second person call him ‘mister’.

“Fox. You don’t have to call me mister.” He laughed. “But thanks.”

“Yo, Fox!” Falco startled him, but Krystal had already turned her head to look behind him and at the gap in the curtained wall where the bird now stood with Slippy by his side.

“Got something?” He turned and asked.

“General Pepper wants to see us on the bridge.” The bird replied, and Fox nodded in agreement.

“Duty calls, but I’ll keep in touch to make sure you’re alright, ok?” He turned back to the girl and assured her he’d be back. She smiled and wished him luck, pulling her hand away from his so he could leave.

After the three men left the infirmary Slippy asked if that was the girl Fox had rescued, to which he confirmed it was.

“She’s cute, but I don’t think you’re enough of a Casanova to turn a damsel into a dame.” Falco remarked, and Fox shook his head and hoped the girl didn’t hear him either with her ears or in her head.

When they reached the bridge, they were directed to a room attached to the side of the main chamber. The interior was warm with red carpet and a large wooden desk in the corner. It was the nicest Captain’s cabin Fox had ever seen with a large circular table in its center with a hologram of Sauria projected above it. Around that table were several figures looking like they were Cornerian top brass, and among them was the General himself.

“Fox McCloud! It is good to see you made it back from Sauria in one piece.” The General said the moment he caught sight of the trio.

Fox lifted his hand in salute with Falco and Slippy doing the same. They weren’t really members of the Cornerian military, but in the presence of so much brass Fox felt it best to play ball.

There was a heavy air in the room that wasn’t coming from the ventilation. Not including the General, there were six other men of rank standing around the hologram, and each of these men appeared to be accompanied by some kind of adjutant. Between them all Fox saw enough chevrons and medals that you could build a new Arwing with all the materials.

Were these all Admirals? He thought Corneria had more top brass than this, but he wasn’t sure. He never kept up too much with the politics of the Cornerian military.

“General.” Fox nodded, then put his hand down and assumed a relaxed posture.

The older dog looked him over briefly, then cast his eyes to the other two before nodding to them all. Fox didn’t feel like now was the time for casual banter, so he kept himself brief.

“Gentleman, now that the Star Fox Team is here, we can continue our debriefing. We’ve already compiled a report regarding the battle in orbit, but we have little understanding of what happened to you on the planet. Fox, I want you to describe to us what happened on Sauria over the past 24 hours.” The General told him.

There was a lot to tell, and Fox described it as best as he could, starting with him landing his Arwing in the jungle and carrying on from there. Periodically, one of the brass would stop him to clarify a detail or to ask a question, and Fox did his best to comply.

“After I hijacked a shuttle I was able to return to the Force Point Temple. The entrance had sustained heavy damage from a laser cannon. The pilot of the shuttle led me to believe that it was caused by the Imperial flagship firing its main weapon.”

“The same ship that single handedly destroyed half of Admiral Dachshund’s fleet?” One of them stopped him to ask.

“I believe so, Sir, but the damage done to the entrance was not as severe as what we encountered in orbit, and I... believe I know why that is.” Fox replied, which prompted another question.

“Inside the Force Point Temple were these objects called, uh...” He had to stop to recall their name. “Kinetic Cells.”

“These cells were some kind of ancient battery created by the Krazoa, and Andross somehow found out they existed. That’s more than likely why the Empire came to Sauria in the first place, and once they were in the Temple, they located several of them. If the Empire had managed to smuggle some of them out of the Temple before I blew it up, then that might explain why their flagship was so much more powerful once in orbit.”

“And how did you come to find this information?” One of the men asked.

He thought of Krystal, and her mind reading powers, the artificial intelligence she was speaking with... Fox couldn’t help but to pause.

“The teenage girl I rescued from the Force Point Temple told me all of this. When she’d been first captured, they took her into the Temple for interrogation, but their scientists tripped an alarm and the whole Temple went into lockdown. That’s what caused the energy field to appear around the planet. While the girl was trapped inside with the Imperials she overheard all of their communications. She was in the same room with their Admiral.” He told them the truth while omitting more than a handful of things that he didn’t want to have to explain. How would they react to being told there was an advanced AI in the Temple along with a girl trapped naked in a blue floating rock? What would they do to her if they found out she could read people’s minds?

“When we recovered your Arwing our report states that the two of you were both injured, and that she was found wearing only your jacket.” General Pepper pointed out, then looked down at the table to pick up a metallic tablet before turning its screen on. There was a data readout on the tablet that the General skimmed through before continuing.

“The medical report doesn’t indicate that the girl had been...” The dog paused like he was uncomfortable. “Her medical report says she suffered a concussion, three broken ribs, numerous other mild injuries. Evidence of... brain swelling. But her rape kit was negative. Do you know if she had been harmed in any other way?”

Fox felt uncomfortable. She hadn’t told him anything like that had happened, and as far as he knew she’d been inside the floating crystal the whole time. He honestly couldn’t say, but he’d just told them he’d found her there in a room full of Imperial goons!

“I honestly don’t know. She only told me her ribs were broken when I grabbed her.”

“How did you get inside the Temple and escape with her if it was locked down?” One of them asked, and Fox felt like his net of lies was beginning to entrap him all because he wanted to protect the girl. Krystal had been the one to unlock everything, as well as being the one who triggered the self-destruct. He had to think quick, and just commit to his lies.

“The Empire was using something to trick the Temple into thinking they were allies. I assume that’s how they gained entry in the first place. When they screwed up and triggered the lock down, they had to find a new way to trick the Temple’s computer. From what she told me they managed to find a way to forge security clearances and started reopening the Temple door by door. The girl had stolen a radio and was communicating with me whenever she had the chance.”

“I had already snuck my way towards the Temple door and when there was an opening in their patrols and... just had to make a run for it, Sir. It was risky, but the girl was telling me that they’d found those batteries, and that they were excited about it. It’s when I learned that it was something Andross wanted from Sauria. Once inside I had to avoid detection and eventually found my way to where she was.”

“And General, I can’t explain what happened to cause the self-destruct, but while I was inside the Temple the lights all turned red and a foreign language started playing a message on repeat. I can’t repeat to you what it said, but with the red lights it felt like something bad. Using the confusion caused by the lights and alien message, I shot my way into the room, grabbed the girl and carried her back out with my Arwing flying to meet us on autopilot.”

“So, you had no idea it was going to explode? What about the batteries?” He was asked.

Fox shrugged. The longer this debriefing lasted the more uncomfortable he became.

“I had no way to confirm anything. It was instinct, that something bad was going to happen and I didn’t want to be around for it. I assume the Imperials must have felt the same way, since after I took off in my Arwing their ships all began to launch. The explosion happened as I was already gaining altitude with the girl.”

“Our reconnaissance of the Temple site is... frightening, McCloud.” One of the brass spoke up, the terrier looking at his own tablet.

“Have you seen it?” The same man asked.

“No, Sir. I have not seen the report, or the Temple site since leaving it.”

General Pepper gestured to an aide who began to press buttons on the table’s control panel. The hologram overhead began to shift into an overhead view of what Fox thought was the Saurian jungle, but there was a massive gaping hole right in the middle of it.

“This chasm is ten miles in diameter and more than twenty deep. Not only do we not know how this was done, but there is not one thing in our arsenal that could replicate a similar result. Do you have any idea how this may have been done?” He was asked.

He looked grimly at the hologram, knowing full well it was the Krazoa technology that was responsible. He shook his head.

“The Krazoa are thousands of years more advanced than us, Sir. Might as well be magic.” He replied.

The brass shook his head and sat his tablet down.

“Fox, I’d like you to compile a detailed report of everything that happened down there and submit it to us for review. We’ll be dissecting this disaster for months trying to figure it all out.” General Pepper asked him, and Fox immediately agreed to it. If all he had to do was write it down, then that’d be easy. He just had to remember all his lies and not contradict himself.

The General then started asking the same aide from before to change the hologram to the ‘Fleet’. The hologram shifted on command to show what looked like a couple hundred ships floating in orbit around Sauria.

“After the arrival of the 2nd Fleet I commanded the 1st, 3rd, and 4th to join it. I’ve already dispatched small detachments to begin searching local space for any signs of Imperial activity, and we’re in the middle stages of assembling a plan for a task force. Battle records show there were 81 ships in the Imperial fleet, and far too many of them are presently unaccounted for. We can’t determine how many were destroyed when their flagship blew up, Fox. We have no idea how many of them escaped Sauria.” The General confessed.

“My guess would be worse than yours, Sir.” Fox admitted. He’d have no idea.

“I would like the Star Fox Team to be a part of the new task force, once created, and to assist us in tracking down every last one of those scoundrels. Is this something you can do for us, Fox?” General Pepper asked.

Fox turned and acknowledged his two wingmen. Both of them looked at him and nodded, the pair setting their jawlines and signaling with their body language that they were game for anything. It was all up to Fox to decide. He turned back to the General and nodded to him, and to the other members of Corneria’s top brass.

“Of course, General. It’ll be just like old times.” He replied.

“Glad to hear it, Fox. Dismissed.”

Fox snapped a salute, and turned to leave, but stopped himself before reaching the door.

“General?” He asked, the old dog turning his attention back to him and nodding.

“Has the girl been questioned yet?”

“No, we’ve been waiting for her condition to improve. Once she’s cleared, we’ll send a team to question her.”

“With your permission I would like to question her myself while I compile my own report. I think she’ll be more comfortable talking with someone she knows, especially with everything she’s been through.” Fox told the other man. The General looked thoughtful for a moment, then looked towards one of the other men, one of the brass, who then answered.

“Certainly, it can be arranged.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Fox nodded, raising his hand in a casual salute before turning back towards the door to make his exit, feeling relieved that he had a way to cover for his lies now that he could get to Krystal before some Intelligence officer did.

Meanwhile, as Krystal laid in her bed, she listened to the steady stream of noise around her. With her ears she tried to focus on the work the nurses were doing, their conversations, the sound of equipment being moved, the rhythmic noise of footsteps. Krystal had hoped that if she paid close enough attention to the physical world around her then she might be able to drown out the noise of everyone's thoughts.

She failed.

The background noise of so many people was omnipresent in her head, and there was nothing she could do to silence it. Her headaches had subsided with the help of her new medications, but she could still hear everything around her, and what she couldn't hear she still felt.

The orchestra of voices ebbed and flowed like water in waves, but the energy driving it was always the same. She didn't need to hear each individual voice to understand the emotion that rested in that person's soul. There was so much fear, anger, and dread. She had to endure the suffering of those injured in their beds around her, and the feelings of those tending to their wounds, and the many soldiers all anxiously waiting for what would come next.

'The war was supposed to be over!' she'd heard spoken by so many voices as the men and women around her all recoiled from what had happened at Sauria.

And her ribs still hurt. She felt so pitiful lying there, her depression reaching new depths by the thoughts of so many wounded and hurting souls around her.

Somewhere in the distance she could feel traces of Mr.-, no, Fox. He wanted her to stop calling him Mr. McCloud. Fox was somewhere on the ship still, but she couldn't single out his voice. It was his presence that she felt instead. She'd been so close to him in his Arwing, sharing that terrifying experience, that she felt like she'd learned more than just the sound of his inner voice, but something more than that. It was so strange being able to feel someone's presence at a distance. She was reminded of her own mother, teasing her father time and again about how a woman's intuition was always right.

Krystal knew there was no such thing as women's intuition, or a man's gut instinct, and yet here she was lying in bed feeling the impossible. She knew where Fox McCloud was like a compass had been installed inside her brain. Krystal did not know what the Voice did to her in the Stronghold. It said it had made her 'compatible', but what did that really mean? If she could hear people's thoughts, and know where they were even if they were far away, what other powers might she have?

What even were the Krazoa if this was the power they could wield? Was it natural, or did they change themselves to become like this through the power of their technology? She was reminded of the Psionic Purge... of their terrifying weapons. Whatever they were, she hated them now! They'd brought so much pain to Sauria, and now to all of Lylat.

Familiar voices were in the distance but approaching. As they grew closer the voices came into focus and she recognized them as her parents. They were being brought down the hall by a

nurse. Her father was angry, accusatory, demanding to know why they'd been prevented from seeing their daughter sooner.

She couldn't even hear them with her ears yet and she already knew they were making a scene on her behalf, and she felt embarrassed. When they finally stepped into ear shot, she wanted to cry. To her, the separation from the parents didn't feel like a few hours or even a few days, it felt like years! She finally got to hear their voices and she knew they were ok!

They stepped through the curtain, and both her parents rushed to her side, her mother breaking down into tears alongside her as their family was reunited.

"Oh, my baby!" Her mother sobbed, her father taking the care to cradle her mother into his side while his own eyes bore the look of sleepless nights, but he was trying to keep himself strong for both his girls. She could hear the rapid emotions in their hearts, the words they spoke, and the words they kept inside.

"Mom! Dad!" Krystal started to cry, reaching out to them as they took her hands, but stopped when she winced. Her ribs were acting up and her mother rushed around to the other side of the bed to take her hand, so she didn't have to twist in her bed.

"We're so glad you're safe, honey. We were so worried!" He told her, and she squeezed his hand as hard as she could, which wasn't by very much.

"I'm so glad you're both safe." She told her parents, but her mother shook her head fiercely and insisted in her thoughts that it was her daughter that had been in the most danger.

"We were fine, baby. It was you we were worried about." Both of them were lying, hiding what they had gone through in the cold caves of Sauria, and ignoring the abuse they'd suffered at the hands of the Empire. They were hiding all of it behind their love for her, and Krystal started crying harder. Now she knew how much her parents held from her every day, as they put her before themselves.

"We're here honey, it's going to be alright." Her father soothed her, taking her hand in both of his and patting the back of her hand gently.

There were two nurses outside their cubicle talking low, but Krystal could hear in their heads that they were frustrated by the 'two civvies' barging into their infirmary. They weren't cruel, but their thoughts were consumed with all the work they had to do, the injured patients that all needed care and rest. One nurse was repeating in his head Krystal's list of injuries and how she needed to rest and recover as much as possible.

Krystal was mad at, but also understanding, of the nurse's position. She did need rest, much more than she probably realized, but she wanted to see her parents more.

"No one would tell us what had happened to you until we started threatening to throw fists!" Her father said, his anger sharply rising as he recalled in his thoughts how much effort it took to get answers from the soldiers keeping watch of them and their colleagues in a hangar bay. She saw images in her mind, pulled from her father's head, of makeshift housing and cubicles erected out of tents in a large metal room filled with military equipment. How could she see all of this without ever having been there?

“They finally let us come see you.” Her mother added and leaned her head down to hold Krystal’s hand to her cheek as she quietly wept. Her mother was reaching her emotional limit and was trying to calm herself down. Her father; however, was strong enough to keep talking to her.

“When we were told they found you with Fox McCloud we were so relieved, honey. We... we didn’t know if he could rescue you, but he did!” He told her, smiling even as she could feel his fear buried behind his smile. She could see fragments of a conversation her father had with Fox. An exchange of words and a promise to save her. Fox had been looking for her well before he reached the Stronghold...

“He was here earlier.” She told him. “But he had to leave to talk to the General.”

“I would have liked to meet him again, to thank him.” He replied.

Her mother wasn’t speaking, still cradling her hand in hers, but she was thinking of what her father had just said. Both her parents were so grateful to Fox for what he’d done. Krystal would have to make sure they got to see him again so they could express their gratitude.

Gratitude.

There was an undercurrent of that feeling coursing through the whole ship, but much of it was hard to follow, being drowned out by the fear and dread. The flow of that emotion coursed around the ship, and Krystal could feel a part of it being drawn towards Fox and his companions, but there were other currents as well. There were many people on this ship who hadn’t fought in the battle, and they were all concerned, but from them she could feel that they were also grateful to the wounded men and women sharing the infirmary with her.

When she was a little girl, she remembered feeling something like this. After Andross’ army had attacked Corneria she’d seen the fear, felt it herself. It was terrible, but there the Cornerian military stood in the aftermath, picking up the pieces, launching off into battle to pursue their attackers. The Star Fox Team had been there, had been the ones to deal the fatal blow that drove the enemy back to the stars.

His face looked younger then, but she could still remember him on the tv. He and his companions looked so confident and brave, and they’d just pushed back the Empire! She felt hope then, and her parents would have felt it, too, and her neighbors. Everyone on Corneria would have felt it!

This ship filled with suffering needed that same hope now, and she wanted to believe Fox could do it again. She squeezed her mother’s hand gently.

She was terrified of the Krazoa, but their technology had given her an incredible gift. It let her help Fox both on Sauria and in space. The voice, Central Command, probably never intended for her to use this power for anything other than protecting its master’s technology, but now it was gone, lost in a hole that reached deep underground. She didn’t know how she knew that, but she knew it was true. The Stronghold, the Graveyard, the dig sites they’d all spent months studying. They were all gone.

But maybe she could help to bring hope back, and not just to this ship but to everyone. News would get out; people would learn the Empire wasn’t dead. They’d be frightened! She bit her lip,

and her father leaned towards her to run his hand across her cheek, not knowing why she looked so filled with sorrow. She knew she could help!

She needed to speak to Fox again. She needed to ask him if he would let her help him again, to bring back hope like he had on Corneria so many years ago. Krystal looked to her father and squeezed his hand, holding both of her parents as tight as her weak body would allow. They wouldn't be happy with her decision, but there was no other decision to be made. Krystal needed to join his team if she was to have any way of helping.

The Chief Medical Officer hadn't been happy that General Pepper had called one of his patients out of Medical and to the bridge. Fox felt fine apart from his lingering headache, but for now the doctor was his boss and if the boss wanted to run another round of tests on him before clearing him for duty, then Fox guessed that's what he had to do. Just like old times.

The infirmary hadn't changed much since he'd left, and Peppy was still sound asleep in his bed. The attending nurse had told him that he'd regained consciousness briefly but wasn't well enough to do more than fall back asleep. Between his injuries and exhaustion, he'd be in this state for at least another day, day and a half, but even after that he'd still be under strict doctor's orders.

The examinations they put Fox through gave him time to stew in his own thoughts. With the General now enlisting the Star Fox Team for his new taskforce he knew he could at least keep the bills paid for a while longer. He wore a wry smile that confused his nurse a bit, but he needed to think of something positive to offset all the bad. With Peppy so badly hurt... they were stuck as a three-man team for now.

What was left of the 5th fleet was so tattered that the General had ordered the unit to be mothballed to the history books. Instead of reforming the 5th they would just reorganize it into the beginnings of Pepper's new Anti-Imperial Task Force. No more relying on small recon teams to prowl the depths of space. He had every intention of building a migratory force that could explore every inch of Lylat that would have enough firepower to bring hell down on the Empire once they found them.

The Star Fox Team would be a part of this new unit as a special vanguard, and with The Great Fox's superior maneuverability he could travel where the new AITF fleet couldn't easily reach. His team would become the tip of the General's spear.

"Apart from your minor injuries you appear to be healthy, Mr. McCloud. Please continue to take the rest of your prescribed medication, and you're cleared for duty." The Chief Medical Officer told him after reviewing his exam results.

"Thank you, Doc." He replied and hopped off the bed to begin changing back into his uniform. He wondered where his jacket went off to, then remembered it would have been with the girl. Krystal was her name. He'd really only known her for such a short amount of time.

He made his way from his cubicle and back to Peppy, checking in on the old man to find him still quietly snoozing. Fox decided he was in good enough hands to be left alone, then left the rabbit behind as he tracked down Krystal's cubicle. When he arrived, she was alone, and looking like she'd been crying, her eyes red from shed tears.

"How you doing?" He asked her, stepping inside.

"I had a fight with my parents." She replied, and he couldn't stop himself some smiling. Teenagers. At least she got to see them safe and sound.

Before he could reach her bed, she lifted a hand and pointed at the corner of the cubicle. He glanced over and saw a small stool with a piece of clothing folded neatly atop it. He smiled again, thanked her, and went to retrieve his jacket from the stool. It felt good to wear it again.

"It looks good on you." She told him.

"Thanks."

What was your fight about, he thought to himself, adjusting to the knowledge that she could hear anything he had running in his head. Seeing her parents again should have been a happy occasion.

"It wasn't all bad. I told them I wanted to volunteer." She answered.

He inhaled, knowing what that meant. After these terrible losses the Cornerian military was about to go into overdrive in an effort to find new recruits. In this day and age there was no conscription or draft so they had to convince people to sign up of their own free will. That was easier to do when there was a frightening enemy standing on your doorstep, and the looming specter of the Empire was rather frightening indeed. There'd be a lot of young hot shots signing up in the coming months.

"You're right." She replied.

Krystal opened her eyes again and looked at him like she wanted to say more.

"You know what that means, right?" He said out loud.

"You're going to have to be on a ship like this every day. Surrounded by all of this." He continued, lifting his hand as he spoke to spin a finger around in a circle to signify the horde of people crammed into a starship.

He then purposely thought of everyone who had died. Every single starship in the Cornerian Armada could become a steel coffin for those on them. Volunteering for the military was dangerous even in peacetime. There were always mercenary gangs, criminal thugs, smugglers, traffickers. Even without the Empire around there were still problems the military had to deal with.

The girl nodded.

"I know." Her voice cracked. "I know it."

Do you?

She nodded.

“I want to help. There’s something I can do that no one else can.” She replied.

“Have you told anyone?” He asked.

She shook her head. Good, he thought. He didn’t know how that would go over with the military if they found out they had a real psychic lying right beneath their noses. What would a girl like her end up doing in the military, he wondered to himself without caring if she ‘overheard’ him thinking. Most jobs in the military weren’t illustrious or pretty. Even battleships had janitors.

“I can learn how to be a pilot. I can remember how you flew your ship.” She started, looking at him intensely like she needed his approval. “You didn’t think words when you were flying your Arwing, but I could still feel it. The buttons you pressed and why, the flight stick directions.”

Overhearing it in my head isn’t the same as flying a real space fighter.

“I know, but I can learn. I want to learn!” She told him fiercely now. He could tell she meant it.

“I believe you.” He replied, and he meant it as much as she did. Her voice was weak, but the conviction was still there. She smiled, but looked afraid, too.

“I can put in a good word for you. I’m an alumna of the Cornerian Flight Academy after all.” He told her with a smile of his own and put his hands on the rails of the bed. She reached out to him and put her palm over his hand and squeezed.

“Can I join your Team?” She asked, and he stopped in his tracks both physical and otherwise.

“You know what I can do, and you know I’m willing to learn. You can put in a good word for me.” She smiled, her eyes watering up as his thoughts bounced around with many different ways of telling her no.

There were all kinds of reasons to refuse her, the dangers, the additional supplies they’d need for a 5th person, the extensive training she’d need. He watched her intently as he rattled off his reasons to himself, locked inside his own head for the moment while the girl clung to his hand desperately, her eyes beginning to water up until she had to shut them to stop herself from shedding a tear.

“You’re asking a lot.” He said out loud.

“I know.” She replied weakly. The conviction was still there, but she sounded so afraid. He could shut her down right now, and just put in a good word to Bill. He probably still had connections at the Academy and could pull strings. The girl sure was a lot of trouble, he thought more to himself than to her.

She gasped, revealing she’d been holding her breath. As her tears began to flow, she was smiling. She knew he’d made up his mind the moment he’d done it.

“Are you even old enough to drive?” He asked.

She nodded happily.

“I’m 18.”

He sighed and reached up to rub the spot between his eyes again. You better listen good, and take everything you’re taught to heart, or you’re out. To the Academy you’ll go.

“I promise!” She told him. He looked at her again and reached his free hand over to hers and gave it a gentle pat.

“Rest up, ‘recruit’. Once you’re cleared for duty I can give you a tour of your new home.” He told her, thinking of The Great Fox. He didn’t need to read a girl’s mind to know how happy she was.

Guess the Team was now back up to four.

A few days later an assembly was called for by General Pepper, and he wanted everyone from the 5th Fleet to be in attendance along with the civilians that were on Sauria. Krystal was there along with the rest of the Star Fox Team, having recovered enough to attend so long as she favored her ribs. The eldest member of the Team, Peppy Hare, was there, too, but with his condition he was given a wheelchair to use during the ceremony. She could feel his pained thoughts, both physical and emotional.

The Ferratus’ hangar bay where they’d been gathered had been completely emptied out to serve as a makeshift auditorium. The only evidence that it had once been a hangar were the squadron of space fighters hanging in their gantries suspended overhead. Beneath them now stood the hundreds of surviving servicemen and women of the 5th Fleet. Many were still recovering from their injuries, but they wore their bandaged wounds with pride as they remained stiff at attention while General Pepper and the other gathered officials moved slowly through the gathered assembly.

Each came to a stop before every serviceman and pinned a medal of honor to their chest and thanked them for their service. It was a solemn and lengthy affair as there were many medals to give, and some people received more than others for their acts of heroism.

A stage had been hastily erected in front of the gathered crowd, and at its base was an arrangement of framed crew manifests. There was one for each ship in the 5th fleet, and they all contained a list of those who had died. Krystal didn’t have a chance to read them, but she could hear everyone’s thoughts, and heard so many names be spoken in people’s hearts. It took so much effort for her to keep herself together as she was crushed by the weight of so much grief and anger being gathered in one place.

She wasn’t standing with the civilians who’d been gathered. Her parents and colleagues, as well as Fox and his Team, had been instructed to stand in the front row right in front of the stage. They had been the starting point of the ‘Saurian Incident’, its ground zero. So, it had been decided that they would be put front and center.

Her clothes did not fit well, since they were not tailored for a girl. Fox had gifted her one of his own spare uniforms, since they were apparently the same height. He'd seemed so much taller before, but then again, she only got her first chance to stand next to him the day before. He'd given her a jacket and a jumpsuit, which only barely fit her feminine frame due to her mother's help and a handful of sewing needles. The jacket hung awkwardly off her narrow shoulders, and the jumpsuit hugged too tightly to her hips. The boots she'd been given were loose and ill fitted, nor was there a spare scarf for her to wear like the others did. Standing next to them all without a complete uniform left her feeling almost naked.

Fox promised he would get a uniform commissioned for her soon, but for now she could only thank him earnestly for letting her have this much. She was proud of the hand-me-down and incomplete uniform she wore. It meant something special to her, something far greater than herself.

Her parents had been... upset with her choosing this path, and she knew it far better than their words could express. She could feel it in their hearts, the dread and fear they felt the instant they saw her wearing the uniform. Her mother was terrified for her, and her father was a mix of pride and disappointment. He didn't know how to feel about his daughter leaving him, abandoning their life's work to join something new.

It was difficult for her to stand so still and at attention. None of the civilians bothered. They stood as still as they could, of course, but they weren't military. They all wobbled and adjusted their stances, scratching itches without looking too disrespectful. Her new Team were at attention perfectly, even the short frog she'd been introduced to. Of the four original members of the Team Slippy seemed to be the one who fit the least in the group.

But they were all acting as professionals today, even Peppy who was still in his chair, eyes forward as he waited for the 'brass' to come to them. She didn't really understand why they were called 'the brass' until it was finally her turn.

A middle-aged man in a tailored dress uniform stood before her, and he had a young assistant following behind him with a wooden box in his hands. He turned to his assistant and removed a silver and opal medal from the box before turning to pin it on her jacket just above her left breast.

"The highest honor we can bestow upon a civilian. Thank you for your courage, young lady." He told her as he finished pinning the medal. She knew this man was aware of who she was, he was a very important man. The medal she'd just been given was a Proof of Civilian Valor. She'd never heard of that one before. The man nodded to her before stepping aside to stand before Fox.

He received two medals, and by listening to their thoughts she knew what those medals were for. One was a Medal of Honor, for his acts of heroism, and the other a purple heart, for having been wounded in battle. She wondered why she didn't get one of those. Slippy and Falco were next, and each received a medal of honor, but not a purple one. The last in line was Peppy who received the same two medals as Fox.

The old rabbit's thoughts were eerily quiet. What she did get from him were thoughts of his aches and pains, and an empty feeling of dread. The others were more animated in their thoughts. Falco was restless and wanting to leave, his thoughts drifting to any number of other

activities he'd rather be doing, whereas Slippy was more concerned with their Arwings and The Great Fox. All of them needed repairs.

Fox was dwelling hard on logistics she didn't understand. Repairs to the ships, their finances, travel preparations, coordinating with the rest of the AITF, and then again in the background was the feeling of empty dread coming from the old rabbit. He feared something, she knew it, but he refused to say its name even in his thoughts. Sometimes he thought of her, and how much of a challenge it would be to train her as a pilot, but that's where his thoughts ended.

An hour later and the brass had finished awarding everyone their medals. The officials all took the stage and stood behind General Pepper who approached a steel podium with a microphone. There were other servicemen standing below the stage with film equipment and cameras. As he began to speak, she could hear his voice along with his thoughts, knowing what he would say before his mouth could even form the words.

"To all sailors and pilots gathered here today of the 5th Cornerian Fleet of Katina, we mourn the passing of our countryman who died gallantly in the heat of battle. Our enemy, resurrected now after eight years of peace, have dealt a vicious blow to our steel, but not to our resolve. In honor of those departed, and in defense of those who hope for a future filled with peace, I am deactivating the 5th Fleet and reassembling it under a new title. The history of the 5th will be forever remembered, and all you gathered here today will be given a renewed purpose, a great crusade towards which we have unknowingly striven these past many years."

"Your service and sacrifice over the last 36 hours will not be forgotten!"

"I, General Pepper, acting Commander in Chief of the Cornerian Army and Defense Forces, hereby activate the Anti-Imperial Task Force. It will be your mission to hunt down every trace of the Empire that remains in the Lylat System, and to bring them to justice! New warships will be commissioned for this cause, and veteran sailors and pilots will be recruited from all across Lylat to bolster your numbers to rival that of any adversary. There will be no greater force of military might than the AITF."

He paused and took a silent breath before looking down at Fox, and then to the rest of Team with his eyes stopping last at her. He questioned her presence, his thoughts filled with doubt, which made her fur want to bristle. She wouldn't let another's doubt stop her from doing what she must!

"I also extend thanks to the Star Fox Team who was our first response to this new threat which we face. Our victory over the Empire could not have happened were it not for their bravery. You aided us once eight years ago, and I am proud to have you by our side once again as part of the AITF."

"To all of you! I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty, and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full victory. Good luck."

"Dismissed." He finished, snapping his hand up in salute, nodding to those gathered before taking a step back from the podium and pivoting on a heel to leave the stage. The officials all followed him down the steps while the camera crews snapped photos of what would surely be remembered as a historic moment.

Throughout the hangar the servicemen were given orders by their superiors to exit the hangar bay, and depending on if they were injured or not, they were being given new duties or getting sent back to the infirmary to finish their recovery.

She turned to Fox, looked at the medals on his chest and then down at her own. She questioned herself if she truly earned the pretty piece of metal she'd been given, recalling those she'd killed in the Stronghold with a power she couldn't understand. Was this the price one paid for heroism? Krystal looked back to Fox and wondered how large a price he had paid, and Falco, too. Slippy, and then Peppy. What had it cost them?

"Well, now that this is done can we go back to the ship? I got work to do!" Falco whined, stretching his back and legs from having stood still for so long.

"You're both cleared for duty. Have they released supplies for the repairs yet, Slippy?" Fox asked, turning towards the other team members for now.

"Yeah, they got me most of everything I need, but to fix the g-diffusers I had to put in a request from Space Dynamics to send us more parts. I have enough to fix both Arwings, but then I'm tapped out. If they break again, we're toast!" The frog replied.

"What about the new Arwings?" Fox asked, Krystal knowing that they weren't new Arwings for her, but a replacement for the ones that were lost in the fighting. Peppy's had been completely destroyed, and Fox's had been so heavily damaged that they'd scrapped it for spare parts.

"They're coming, but it'll be a few months. Dad's trying to fast track them for us." He replied, the two men discussing one thing verbally while the frog was flipping through a densely packed rolodex in his mind as he mentally reviewed everything he'd need to fix two Arwings and to prep two more for active duty once they arrived from Space Dynamics.

A nurse approached them, wanting to take Peppy back to his room in the infirmary, but she could feel a sense of terrible dread coming from the rabbit the closer the nurse got to his wheelchair.

The old man's thoughts turned back to her, the training she'd need to do, everything she would have to learn if she wanted to pilot an Arwing. It was almost like he was reliving memories. He was thinking of a much younger Fox sitting in a flight simulator. There were tears in the young man's eyes. She saw the rabbit reaching out to Fox, his fur was less grey, and his hands were far stronger. He put his hand over Fox's shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly.

She felt a lump in her throat, but she didn't know why. Why was Peppy thinking about Fox's father? Where was this feeling of terrible loss coming from?

Before he could be wheeled away, he put his hand up to stop the nurse.

"Krystal." He said, looking at her.

A terrible weight began to settle over her shoulders as he made to stand, his legs shaking under his weight as his hands pushed against the arms of the wheelchair. The nurse tried to stop him, but he angrily refused any attempt to be seated back in his chair.

“Peppy.” Fox approached him concerned, but a look from the old man stopped him, and Fox stepped back, his thoughts confused, but he wasn’t willing to challenge his elder. She felt respect coming from Fox, she knew he thought highly of Peppy, so much so that it had fooled her into thinking that the man had been his father.

The old man stood, his gaze returned to her, freezing her in place as he forced himself upright. The pain in his body became her pain, the ache in his head becoming her own, as he took the few steps required to stand in front of her. The weight grew more terrible as she felt her eyes begin to tear up as the thing the man feared most became a reality.

He lifted his hands to his neck and began to untie his scarf, its red fabric weathered pink with age for its many years of use. It was the same scarf he’d worn alongside James McCloud, a name she’d never heard of before, but she knew it now. As he unwound it from his neck, she could feel something die inside him. When the scarf left his neck, it took a piece of him with it. He reached out to her and wrapped it around her neck and began to tie it tight.

“Welcome to the Star Fox Team.” He told her.

I will never fly again, he thought, and she began to cry.

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