

# 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.

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## << 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.

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### << 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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Though Krystal could hear it, she couldn't understand a word it spoke.

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More twisted speech filled her head like a knife drawn across a pane of glass and she begged for it to stop! She couldn't feel her body anymore, and everywhere she looked she saw an absence of anything. She was in a black void that had no end, and it terrified her! She had no hands to feel with, no ears with which to hear, and no mouth with which to scream.

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"Shut up!" She tried to think, to think it as loud as she could. The strange voice spoke again, repeatedly until her head hurt, like the more it spoke the more it felt like it was trying to split open her skull with a growing unrelenting pressure. Krystal could only cry out until suddenly, all at once, the discomfort vanished.

[Who Are You?]

The voice spoke in plain language and Krystal felt herself pause, the silence of the void claiming her tongue.

[You Are Not A Master.]

The voice spoke again.

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### << EarthWalker Territory, Planet Sauria >>

Fox hopped out of the cockpit and was left standing on the damaged wing of his fighter. His Arwing wasn't fit to fly, and there were now a dozen cruisers and warships on Sauria. What they'd fought in orbit around the planet was just an appetizer, and he was grateful to know that they'd contacted the Cornerians.

He'd only just barely managed to get away with his tail intact.

"Peppy, Falco, anyone?" He thumbed the radio he clipped to his shoulder.

"We read you, Fox, what's happening down there?" Peppy replied.

"I got shot down and had to hide myself in the jungle."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. It's just the Arwing that's busted. Weapons systems are functional, but the G-Diffuser and engine needs some repair. They have more ships down here, guys. I hope you're ready to fight a full-scale war when the cavalry arrives."

"Are you asking me if I want to earn some overtime?" Falco asked, leaving Fox to smile wryly.

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?