

## 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 H<sub>2</sub>O.

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 adkhith, 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 hug 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.