

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 pallettes 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 pin 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.