

# Chapter 09//SACRIFICE

## << EarthWalker Territory, Planet Sauria >>

For the doctor, it hadn't been easy to convince the EarthWalker King to order his people to flee their homes. If Tappa and his colleagues hadn't worked so hard to earn the trust of the locals, they might not have listened to him when he begged them all to run. He didn't know what Fox McCloud was on about, but he understood how to follow an order and that self-destruct sequences were serious business. If the Empire was going to be responsible for an explosion, then it'd no doubt be a big one!

When 'it' happened, it was the most frightening thing. All of a sudden it was as if daylight had come early, brilliant light illuminating the jungles of Sauria as the villagers struggled to move as quickly as they could, carrying the old on their backs and the young in their arms. They'd all been forced to leave everything behind.

As he looked back from where they'd come, he couldn't see a plume of smoke like he'd expected to, but he had seen... the clouds move. They all moved towards the light like they were being drawn into it. The tapir did not want to dwell on that part at all, his intellect trying to rationalize with science how such a phenomenon could occur.

They were now many miles from the village, and everyone was frightened. When the light had receded and the night sky went dark again, they could all see the flickering light of starships moving skyward. The defense field vanished, too, and those flickering lights just kept on going upwards into space. There were so many of them...

Amidst the stars of Sauria there were flashes of light. The doctor had never witnessed a space battle from a planet's surface before. It was eerily beautiful.

"Nxuk uho kxo cawxkj ad kxo jbo?" King EarthWalker asked him, wanting to know what the flashing streaks of light meant in the sky above them.

Warriors, Dr. Tappa explained. They were fighting in the night sky to protect Sauria, he added. Not just Sauria, but the rest of Lylat, not that the village people here knew much of the world outside their jungle home.

He had to leave his communication equipment behind, so he had no idea what was going on apart from what was obviously a battle.

"Nacc kxo jbo tolacj ro tovoukot?" The King asked if the Empire would lose. Tappa didn't know, but he was hopeful. They'd been beaten before, but at great cost, and with an entire fleet of Corneria's finest out there... He remained hopeful.

As he continued to watch the lights in the sky, he became accustomed to their pattern, so when the pattern changed, he noticed. It was like half the lights in the sky had vanished, and for a moment he was left confused as to why.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light, almost identical to the one from before, but it came from space. The night sky was illuminated for a brief moment, revealing to him a solid beam of light that streaked across space in an instant before vanishing entirely. The sky fell dark again, the flickering lights of battle having all stopped. A moment passed and the lights resumed.

The King asked what the big light meant; the doctor was terrified at what the answer might mean.

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### **<< Arwing 01, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>**

The Cornerian fleet was in shambles, split apart and scattered as allied ships desperately attempted to put distance between each other to prevent another devastating loss like what they'd just suffered. Fox was keyed into the Cornerian combat channels, listening to the panicked voices of officers disseminating their orders.

At least they weren't bad orders. The entire fleet was now separated into two complete halves, each half moving to flank the Empire, whose fleet had not yet broken rank. The radio chatter gave him some hope that the Admiral in charge, an Admiral Dachshund, knew what he was doing.

Fox looked down at the girl, the teenager had quieted herself down, but she was still distraught from before. He couldn't worry about her reading his thoughts anymore, privacy was hardly the top of his concerns now. She'd been crying about how people had died before he even got word on the radio that several of their ships had been destroyed!

She could figure all that out on her own with just her mind.

"Fox McCloud, can you read me, over?" A familiar male voice spoke up over the radio, using the Star Fox Team's private channel.

"I can read you, Bill. I hope you brought friends?" Fox asked, knowing that the dog on the other end was coming with the Husky Squadron in tow. With at least a dozen fighters coming in to escort him he felt a lot better, and it was nice that a familiar face was attached as squadron leader.

"You bet, Fox. We're here to deliver you back behind friendly lines. What's your condition?"

"G-Diffuser is out, engine output reduced to 90% top speed, but my weapons are intact and ready to go. I can fight, but I can't afford to get hit."

"Well, we've got you covered. We're almost on you, should be seeing us on your radar." The dog replied.

Several signatures were appearing on his radar in rapid succession, signaling to him that the Husky Squadron was coming within range. As he watched the radar displaying his allies, more blips began to appear from other directions behind him. He flexed his grip on the flight stick.

“You picking all this up on your radar?” He asked aloud.

“Right, keep straight and we’ll come to your flanks. I’m reading eight, now nine signatures.”

“Be patient, Bill. I’ve got thirteen on mine.”

“Ha! It’ll be an even match then! A squadron for a squadron.” Bill replied with forced cheer. Fox forced a wry smile. It didn’t feel like he was going to catch a break today.

When he linked up with Bill and the Husky Squadron the Cornerian fighters pulled around to Fox’s sides and together they flew as a unit, making for as direct a path as possible to the nearest half of the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet. As they did so the fighters behind them were growing impatient and shooting off their lasers at a distance.

Both squadrons were slowly closing in on each other with Fox’s reduced speed forcing the Cornerians to throttle their own fighters back to keep themselves from outrunning their charge. This was going to get bad.

“I don’t have the speed to outrun them, and I’m slowing you guys down.” Fox told Bill, knowing full well that a battle was going to break out whether they were ready for it or not.

“What’re you thinking?” the dog asked.

“Fight them.” The girl spoke up weakly. Was she agreeing with him? He’d already been thinking that.

“Fight them.” She repeated.

“Let’s take the fight to them, Bill. Better to face them head on than to get shot in the back.”

“Right, I agree.”

Fox began to turn his Arwing around, and the entire squadron followed his lead. Soon they were rapidly closing the gap between them and the enemy. The radar was counting down the distance until a flurry of laser fire erupted at them. Each member of the Husky Squadron evaded and returned fire. Seconds later both squadrons collided, fighters zipping past each other, laser blazing red hot and turning this sector of space into an all-out war zone.

Fox’s thumb held the trigger to charge his lasers and launched a bolt of energy at a stray fighter that had broken too far away from his friends. The two made contact and the enemy ship erupted, the girl going rigid as soon as the explosion had ripped through the enemy ship, tearing it into pieces.

She was left panting, covering her mouth with her hand, knuckles white under her fur like she was in pain. Did she feel that? Was she going to feel this every time someone died?

“Yes.” She said through her hand, anguish in her voice.

It was a chilling thought, knowing he was going to put her through so much pain just trying to stay alive and win this fight.

“We have to fight them!” She countered, covering her mouth back and holding her muzzle shut.

He set his jaws and found his next target, feeling the girl flinch against him as the light of an explosion reflected in the glass of his cockpit.

“Was that one of ours?” he thumbed his radio to ask.

“No! But they’re trying to make sure the next one is!” Bill shouted back.

“Then let’s keep them disappointed!” Fox shouted back, pulling the trigger on his next target.

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

Sergeant Mire had just left the infirmary, the medical staff clearing him for active duty, and whatever that would entail in this battle. His injuries were milder than some of the others that had made it out of the Force Point Temple. He still had a lingering headache, but he was promised by a nurse that it would subside before being given painkillers to help with the discomfort.

It was all a load of shit; he wasn’t a doctor, but he understood how to read a man’s face when he was playing poker. It didn’t look like the medics had any idea what had happened to them all down there. It looked like they were spooked by it.

Mire was a soldier, so he only knew he could still walk and pull a trigger. If he had to endure a mild headache for a few hours while he finished a fight, then he would. He’d go wherever he was ordered to go, which at present was the bridge. The Admiral had asked for him and what remained of his ‘old unit’.

When he reached the bulkhead that led to the ship’s bridge his old unit was there waiting for him. The three men, two apes and a fellow reptile, had not been in the Temple. These were members from his unit during the war, and since then they’d been shuffled to other parts of the fleet, but now here they were again, together.

They each pivoted on their heels to face him, snapping to a salute. Mire saluted them in return, nodding to them and making eye contact with each one in turn.

“Glad to be back, Sir.” The first of them, an ape named Tanner, said. The other two, Mackenzie and Ringo, nodded in agreement.

“Old faces, old memories. Let’s make some new ones.” He replied, and all three men set their jaws and put their hands behind their backs. Professionalism.

They were granted permission to enter the bridge and stood at the back of the large room as the command staff directed the flow of battle. Mire could see the Admiral was not faring well with his injuries, and it caused him some concern. He’d already lost his hand, and now on that same

side he was bandaged up for some kind of severe wound. Mire hadn't been there to see what had caused it.

"Sergeant Mire!" the Admiral shouted upon seeing him and his team standing at attention.

"Admiral!" He snapped a salute in reply, his team salute with him in record time.

The large dinosaur approached them, the Admiral hiding his limp. Seeing him from the front now, Mire knew the Admiral was avoiding going to the infirmary. That would explain why there was a small medical staff here on the bridge. Mire tightened his posture, casting aside his irritation over a headache when his commander was fighting a war having been injured so much worse than himself.

"You were injured in the Temple, but a report said you'd been cleared for duty?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir. I was cleared, feeling no worse for wear. If you have orders, I will be glad to follow them."

The tall man eyed him seriously, then nodded.

"Somewhere out there is The Great Fox. I want your team to destroy it." The Admiral said, his voice serious.

Destroy The Great Fox? That was an incredible task to be given, considering that ship's history. But... It was out there with one of its fighters allegedly damaged. Could his team manage it? It was difficult to say, the fear of failure was at the tip of his tongue, but he also had a burning desire to hop back into a cockpit again, to feel the cold steel of a grip in his palm.

"As you command, Admiral. We'll see it done or die in the attempt." He replied, saluting.

"Then you have your orders, prepare to sortie, launch when ready!" The Admiral replied, nodding before pivoting on a foot to return to the bridge and the frenzied chaos of command. Mire turned to his team, nodding to them in turn. They all wore looks that shared his feelings. A tall order had been made, and they were expected to fill it.

"Let's go." Mire told them.

The four men left the bridge and immediately made their way to the hangar bay. The Grand Gambit did not carry a large complement of fighters, as it was designed primarily as a weapons platform, but it did have enough room for the hardware Sergeant Mire needed for his team.

They were the only four pilots to survive the fighting in Sector Y. The heavy action had been intense with the attrition on both sides reaching the incalculable. Out of the four squadrons that Lord Andross had commissioned, it had been Mire's team that weathered the storm and came out of it unscathed. They'd each become aces in their field, and the Admiral saw to it that their machines were refitted and upgraded as much as possible.

The Sergeant stood in the hangar bay, looking up at the maintenance crews as they crawled over his machine, doing their final checks before clearing them for battle.

It would be good to pilot his Shogun again. The massive mechanoid machine had been his weapon and friend in Sector Y, and now it would be so again at Sauria. The tally marks he'd had the mechanics carve into his shield read fourteen fighters and two battleships. Between the four of them his team had inflicted enough damage on the Cornerians that the remains of their tattered fleet had been able to flee to safety, the enemy too preoccupied with licking their wounds to pursue.

"She's ready to go!" He smiled as a technician shouted to him from the open cockpit of his Shogun.

"And so am I." He replied, now making his way to the gantry.

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### << Arwing 03, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Peppy Hare was doing his best to juggle his radio and his flight stick at the same time. While ROB kept him updated on the fleet's condition, he had to keep up with his two younger wingmen, Slippy and Falco. The latter, their resident ace, was holding his own against the enemy fighter squadrons that were trying, and failing, to overtake The Great Fox.

Between Slippy and himself, the remaining members of the Star Fox Team were doing alright, too, but Peppy was old and getting too grey around the edges. These weren't the same battles he and James had fought together so long ago.

"Peppy, the Beta Division's advance towards the enemy left flank has resumed. The C.A.S. Marco and Iridani have taken heavy damage." ROB told him over the radio.

When the center of the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleets formation had been destroyed Admiral Dachshund had ordered the fleet to split into two divisions, hastily designated Alpha and Beta, with the hope of splitting the enemy's attention and forces, and gambling that if they moved quickly enough to the enemy's flanks that they could entrap them between the Cornerian's and what was assumed to be their flagship.

The ship that had fired that weapon.

If the Cornerians could keep that weapon from firing by using the enemy as a shield, then there was hope they could last long enough for reinforcements to arrive. Even with the early warning from Fox that the 5<sup>th</sup> would be outnumbered it was a struggle getting a new fleet to arrive. The closest fleet to Sauria had been Corneria's 2<sup>nd</sup> Fleet, but they weren't due to arrive for another hour.

Could they last that long? He didn't know, but so far, they'd not lost another ship, but they'd started taking casualties among their fighter squadrons. They were simply too greatly outnumbered, and once their number of fighters was sufficiently thinned out the Empire wouldn't need their big gun to wipe them out anymore. Their air superiority would start picking off their battleships one by one.

“Any news from Fox?” Slippy asked, and Peppy didn’t have an answer apart from that he’d linked up with the Husky Squadron, and was now engaging the enemy, and he told the frog as much.

“How’s everyone holding up out there?” Peppy asked his wingmen and found relief in both their voices and that they were still holding the line against superior numbers.

His radar was a mess of signals, so many of them it was difficult to sort through. When four new signals appeared at the outer edge of the radar the rabbit didn’t even notice, as they just blended in with the mass of glowing red signals from all the other fighters swarming the battlefield.

A laser bolt struck his Arwing, his ship’s shields crackling briefly before shattering and deflecting the bolt, leaving a black streak across his bow. Looking up, he saw three more lasers coming at him, and he yanked the stick to the right and thumbed his G-Diffuser, deflecting all three lasers and sending them scattering while his foot hit the foot pedal, triggering his booster.

Where his Arwing had been just prior was now filled with more laser fire, with a single large mechanoid quickly falling into place behind Peppy.

“Peppy, we got robots!” Slippy shouted, but he was already well aware. He spotted two more machines pivoting a hundred meters above him, their apogee motors firing in all directions to hold their positions as they pumped out round after round of laser fire at Peppy’s Arwing.

Slippy laid into the pair with his own lasers, but the twin machines launched apart and deflected the attacks with their massive shields. Peppy throttled up his Arwing and caught a glimpse at the first mech he’d seen, which was now pursuing him. He remembered those!

“We’ve fought these before!” He shouted.

“What’s that? What’s going on?” It was Falco, who had now strayed too far away from the rest of the Team and The Great Fox in his pursuit of more prey.

“We got three, no, four big robots! They’ve got laser cannons and shields!” Peppy replied.

“Those shields deflect better than our G-Diffusers! My shots didn’t even scratch their paint!” Slippy added.

Peppy triggered his G-Diffuser and pulled an Immelmann, tilting his nose up and rolling backwards until he was upside down and aimed back at the enemy. With a spin he deflected more laser fire with his G-Diffuser and spun himself upright again. With his finger on the trigger, he launched a counterattack, his target thrusting out its shield and tucking his legs up behind it to shrink his size. Each laser hit before bouncing off the shield before the machine returned fire from behind the shield.

He spun to the left, deflecting his opponents attack, then slammed his boosters again when another machine appeared overhead and laid into him with his own rifle.

“These guys are good! Falco, break off what you’re doing and get back here!” Peppy shouted, the bird on the other end signaling he was breaking off his pursuit and falling back to The Great Fox. Slippy flew up next to Peppy and together they began to turn themselves back to face their

opponents. The four machines stared back at them from behind their shields, their ape-like faces alight with red glowing eyes, before they each opened fire on the pair.

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### << Shogun Alpha, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Mire pulled his legs up, his limbs strapped tight to the Shogun's leg controls, the machine responding by lifting its own legs up. The Arwings ahead of him dealt only glancing blows with their shield freshly painted up with a special material normally reserved for battleship hulls. A simple laser wasn't going to penetrate this shield!

"We got lucky there's only two!" Ringo, one of his squad mates, shouted from his right side.

"There's a third somewhere nearby, so watch your radar! I don't trust Howler Squadron to keep that one busy for long with the losses they're taking." Mire replied, hitting his thrusters, launching his Shogun vertically while he continued to return fire, both Arwings zipping past him from below with breathtaking speed.

These fighters were fast!

"Ringo, Tanner, focus on target A! Mackenzie form up with me on target B. First of us to take out our target gets dibs on the third one!" Mire ordered, a Shogun quickly appearing to his left side, his weapon in hand and already leading his shots on their target. Mire joined him, watching their shots as they were deflected by the Arwing's defense system.

A frustrating opponent, but at least a Shogun didn't have to pull a special flight maneuver to defend itself! He and Mackenzie launched toward their target at full throttle. They weren't as fast, but their enemy wasn't trying to run away. With their slower speeds the squad of four could easily predict their opponents flight path from a distance and prepare themselves for a counterattack.

The two Arwings hadn't broken away from each other and were now speeding back towards them with lasers lancing through space at them, each bolt was a direct hit, the lasers shattering apart against their shields.

"Grenades!" Mire shouted, and with skill acquired only through practice, all four Shoguns let go of their rifles and popped free a single grenade from behind their shields. Once armed, they let the grenades float free before taking up their rifles again, breaking away in four directions, opening fire at the two Arwings and locking them tight to their original flight path.

They flew right through the spot the Shoguns had just been, and all four grenades detonated across the Arwing's hulls.

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## << Arwing 03, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Warning klaxons were screaming in his ears as the eruption of several explosives hammered his Arwing's shields. Both he and Slippy veered apart, hitting their boosters, and escaping with laser fire leading their trajectories wherever they flew.

"Slippy! Are you all right?" He asked over radio.

"My shields are out!" He replied, Peppy thumbing his console to shut off the siren that was warning him his shields were also gone. He rapidly checked his ship's condition, noting his G-Diffuser was still operable, but without any shields he was left in a sorry state.

"G-Diffuser?"

"I still got mine, but that was close! We can't handle something like that again!" the frog replied, and Peppy was in full agreement.

He began to turn his fighter around, catching sight of The Great Fox in the distance. He thumbed his headset.

"ROB, can you get a target lock on those mechs we're fighting?"

"Affirmative. You and Slippy have engaged four Shogun class Imperial mechanoids."

"Good! Keep that lock on them, we've taken heavy damage and we're missing Fox and Falco! I want you to let me know if you get a clear shot at them as soon as you do!"

"What weapons system should I deploy?"

"Use the nose gun! Surely it's strong enough to punch through their shields."

"Roger." The robot replied.

The rabbit finished his turn and began to circle the group of four mechs. They'd been grouped together, but now had broken up into groups of two with a pair of them heading straight for him.

"Slippy, just hold out until Falco gets back. ROB is going to try and get a shot off on them, too!"

"Copy that, but these guys are really persistent!" The frog shouted back, Peppy clearly seeing the weapons fire in the distance as the two mechs gave chase to his wingman.

Their only advantage right now was their maneuverability and heavy firepower, but Peppy wasn't confident that a bomb would take them out. They weren't as fast as an Arwing but as soon as Peppy launched a bomb they'd see it and split.

If Peppy wanted to get in a hit, then it would take a trick just like the explosive one they'd just pulled on them.

Laser fire came his way, Peppy engaging his G-Diffuser with a spin, then veered off to keep his distance from the two mechs, which were now in hot pursuit. They must have known they'd

done serious damage to their Arwings and were trying to end the fight quick. He checked his radar and saw Falco was still too far away to help, but The Great Fox was still within range.

He needed to get them to stay still! He radioed ROB and told him to pay attention to the two mechs that were tailing him, and to prep the nose gun to fire. If his plan worked then maybe they could cross one bad guy off the list. He turned his Arwing and made a beeline for The Great Fox, drawing the two mechs in behind him.

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### << Shogun Alpha, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

Both of the enemy were heavily damaged now, looking like their shielding systems had been disabled. Mire throttled up his rear boosters to increase his speed, causing Mackenzie to do the same. Their target was retreating back to their mothership, The Great Fox. Both pilots were laying down fire on the enemy craft, but the ship's deflector system was still operational and none of their direct hits mattered. If they were going to destroy this ship, they'd need to get through that defense first.

"Sir! We've got a third Arwing entering to sortie!" Tanner shouted over the radio.

So, they were now two for two over there.

"Draw them both back towards my position! We're pursuing our target back to The Great Fox!"

Ringo and Tanner both shouted their agreement and began to make their way back to regroup with Mire. He and Mackenzie would need to take out this single fighter before they reunited so they could turn their numerical advantage into a two to one.

"What's he doing?" Mackenzie asked.

Mire watched the Arwing up ahead of him, the ship's engines were now going at full thrust with a bright white tail of energy trailing behind him as the pilot's flight path seemed to wobble. Why wasn't he flying in a straight line when he could just use his deflector system to stop their attacks?

Then the Arwing's nose tilted up sharply, the Arwing flying straight up with a bright flash of light filling the void where it'd just been. A laser streaked through space directly at them and Mire instantly thumbed his apogee motors and darted to the side.

"I've been hit!" Mackenzie shouted. Checking the camera to his right side he saw his squad mate veering off to the side with thrusters going full bore as his Shogun favored its left side. His shield and whole left arm were missing!

The Arwing they had been pursuing finished its rotation in space and was now flying back towards them, another flash of light came from the distance, Mire seeing the nose of The Great Fox light up as it shot a laser cannon at Mackenzie's Shogun. With their mothership and one Arwing firing at them now Mire had no choice but to reverse course and fall back towards the

limping Mackenzie, his machine still capable of fighting back but now without its primary defense.

“Status report!” He shouted.

“Whole left arm is missing, minor damage to torso! That laser took it clean off!”

Zooming in on The Great Fox, he could see the pivoting cannon hanging below the ship’s bridge, and then further down the ship from that were another set of guns that were even bigger! If the nose gun could rip through a Shogun’s shields that were as well armored as a battleship’s, then that double barreled main gun needed to be dealt with.

“We regroup! Form up on me, we’ll take the fight to The Great Fox!” He doubled down on his earlier command and fell back to Mackenzie’s side. Together they broke their pursuit of the lone Arwing and keyed in a new route that would link them back up with the others, and then toward their target.

He’d wasted too much time with the Arwings when he should have focused on their mothership! Now, with a third Arwing thrown into the mix the enemy’s aggression was through the roof. That third pilot was impossible to hit and was giving both Ringo and Tanner a hard time. All four pilots of the Star Fox Team were aces, but so were Mire and his team!

That nose gun from The Great Fox was still trying to tag them, but now that they were aware of its existence the threat had been neutralized, and the two wounded Arwings couldn’t mount a strong enough offense to hurt any of the Shoguns they attacked. Shortly after he’d issued the command all four of his Shoguns were together again and ready.

The third Arwing to join the fight pursued them, then launched a ball of energy from his nose. All four Shoguns broke away from each other and in their wake was a massive detonation that rocked the interior of Mire’s cockpit. That was a hell of a blast!

The Arwing flew through the space where the explosion had occurred and began to bank to the right to make another pass at them. Mire had to split his focus in four different directions to keep the Arwings and The Great Fox in check. The Arwing finished its turn and shot toward him with thrusters roaring. Laser broke against his shield, and Mire fired a well-placed leading shot at the Arwing as it passed, the pilot triggering its deflector too late and the blast nailed it in the wing, the craft’s shields flickering under the abuse.

It veered away, and all three Arwings seemed to be tracking away from them, regrouping into a single unit, before making a wide turn that would eventually turn them back around to face them.

“Mackenzie, hunker down behind one of us and fire over our shoulders.”

“Roger!” he replied, moving behind Tanner so he could be shielded as well, using his remaining arm to begin firing at the incoming fighters. All four Shoguns fired at the incoming trio, Mire keeping his attention split between them and their mothership.

The Great Fox wasn’t firing at them, and he didn’t know why.

Two of the fast-approaching fighters launched a pair of bombs from their noses, and the group was forced to separate to avoid the danger, with the third Arwing firing a bomb shortly after

toward Mackenzie and Tanner's position. The bombs detonated, rocking everyone's machines, and causing their viewscreens to flicker briefly from interference. Mire fired off his apogee motors and backed further away, trying to locate the enemy as they zipped past them.

Ringo was several hundred meters in front of him now, pivoting his machine in an effort to track his rifle on the retreating Arwings. Mire noticed a flash of light in his periphery and watched a large laser bolt slam into Ringo's midsection, detonating the Shogun instantly.

"No!" He shouted, turning back toward The Great Fox that had been waiting for them to react to the Arwing threat.

"Commander!" Tanner shouted, coming up to his side with Mackenzie in tow.

"We break for The Great Fox, now!" He ordered, and the three Shoguns all made for the enemy's mothership. All three Arwings were now in pursuit and rapidly gaining. Mire gave the order to aim down and fire behind them, to give the Arwings something to be concerned with. A fresh laser bolt launched from the nose of the Great Fox, forcing the three of them apart and narrowly missing Mire's machine. With the paint singed off his left leg he was getting angrier.

Mackenzie reached The Great Fox first, his lasers hitting the hull with direct hits, but dealing minimal damage.

"Its hide is just as tough as the Gambit's!" Tanner remarked, the gravity of their situation was writ clearly in the tone of his voice. Their orders were to destroy this ship!

"Mackenzie, take the bridge! Tanner, fall back to one of their hangar bays. We'll disable it if we can't destroy it!" He ordered, and the three Shoguns broke away from each other with the Arwings circling their own mothership looking for a chance to take shots at them that wouldn't risk damage to their own ship.

Mire needed to do something about the ship's main gun, moving along the port side of the ship while Tanner followed the spine towards the bridge. The Arwings caught on to their plan and began to open fire, some of the lasers even finding purchase against the mothership's hull but doing little to no damage. Mire evaded, laser fire shattering across his shield, before forcing the Arwing tracking him to pull up in defense as he retaliated with rifle fire.

There was an explosion behind him, and he checked his rear-view screen to see the rear of the Great Fox erupting behind him. Tanner had detonated the last of his grenades, and now an Arwing was frantically firing at what was no doubt him.

"Their bridge is shielded! My lasers can't break through!" Mackenzie shouted, Mire abandoning the main guns and shifted to assist. He reached Mackenzie and let go of his rifle to pull another grenade off the back of his shield. Two Arwings laid into them both, forcing him to tuck in behind his shield while Mackenzie engaged in evasive maneuvers, firing his thrusters and taking him below the bow of the ship.

Laser fire caught Mackenzie in the shoulder and right hip, disabling a few of his apogees and sending him into an uncontrolled spiral as he tried to escape.

"Mackenzie, full thrust, towards the ship!" He ordered, lasers still battering his own shield as he was left without a means to retaliate, his own rifle now floating too far away for him to grab without risking a direct hit to the body.

"Commander! Just take the br-" Mackenzie's radio died as his Shogun was nailed in the chest, his machine detonating shortly afterwards.

Mire yanked at his controls, spinning his machine upside-down and firing his thrusters to launch himself back down below the bow towards the Great Fox's main guns, ignoring the bridge and focusing on the guns, since even if they lost the bridge that didn't mean the ship couldn't fire its main weapon! He approached the barrel of the closet gun and detached a grenade from behind his shield. He was going to plug the barrel with it and blast it from the inside!

He watched through his forward view screen as his Shogun's hand was about to drop the grenade in. The interiors of both barrels began to glow red hot, then both guns fired as one, catching his shogun in the arm and obliterating it along with the grenade.

His machine was cast aside, his machine's arm cleaved off with the entire right side of his hull damaged and melted from being too close to the guns when they'd fired. Warning klaxons were screaming at him that he was heavily damaged, the whole right side of his cockpit's camera feeds reduced to grey static.

"Sergeant Mire!" Tanner shouted over the radio. As Mire's Shogun floated beneath The Great Fox he watched as his squad mate dropped beneath the ship and engaged his thrusters. He was being targeted by two, then three Arwings, half of their weapons fire bouncing off his shield before the rest hammered his machine, triggering its detonation.

He grabbed his controls, found that his remaining thrusters still worked.

Checking his cameras, he couldn't see where his rifle had floated off to, and he gritted his teeth. A new alarm began to scream, signaling that the cockpit's seal had been breached and that he was losing atmosphere. He ripped the oxygen mask out of the side wall and fitted it over his snout, hoping that if his machine sat idle, he could be taken for dead by the enemy. Once the mask was fitting over his face, he brought down the visor from his helmet to protect his eyes if he lost cabin pressure.

As the Great Fox moved slowly overhead, he waited to see what would happen to him, searching the space around him for any sign of his rifle, or Mackenzie's for that matter. All he had left to defend himself with was his shield and one last grenade, and he couldn't use that without ditching his shield for it!

An Arwing entered into his view from a distance. Even from this distance he could tell it had suffered damage all over its hull, so there was no doubt it was one of the two they'd hit with their grenades. His opportunity to destroy The Great Fox had passed, but at least Tanner had managed to deal damage to the ship's hangar bay. Perhaps that would be enough to give this ship enough of a limp for the Admiral to notice.

The Arwing ahead of him did not fire, playing dead was working. His Shogun was critically damaged, the oxygen in the cabin was depleting rapidly with the condensation spilling out into space around it and leaving a frosted coating on his ruined armor. Yes, let the Arwing think he was dead, spilling his icy blood out into space... The fighter began to move closer for a fly by,

and Mire thumbed the control to disconnect his shield from his left arm. The shield detached gently and began to float freely, and he carefully moved his remaining arm to grab the last grenade in his arsenal.

His thrusters were still operable.

Sergeant Mire disabled the warning klaxons and let the cockpit fall silent, save the sound of his breathing through his oxygen mask. This Arwing was making a mistake, it should have just shot him from a distance or left him to die. He armed the grenade and fired his thrusters to full just as the Arwing came foolishly close, the pilot's decision to check for a pulse now costing him his life.

It wasn't the ship the Admiral wanted dead, but a ship was still a ship.

The grenade detonated in his hand, the explosion overtaking his Shogun and causing it, too, to explode. The fire and brimstone Mire had unleashed consumed the Arwing as it flew by, the explosion blackening its hull and sending it spiraling out of control before it crashed into The Great Fox's hull. Sergeant Mire would not die alone.

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

Scales reached up and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He'd started sweating and was now forced to ignore a worsening headache. His combination of injuries was weighing heavier on him, but he was not going to sit down and leave this battle to his crew alone.

"Admiral, the Conquest and Valor have both sent confirmation. The Cornerian flagship is the Eternal." His Comms officer reported, and Scales approached him.

"And we've still got a firm lock on its location? We're certain we've got them?" He asked.

The officer nodded, the ape moving his hands across his controls and directing his attention to one of the monitors. An image appeared on the screen of what looked like a still image from a battle. The officer zoomed in on the image and pointed at the ship's hull, and the name printed on it.

"This is the C.A.S. Eternal, taken during the Battle for Katina eight years ago." He replied, then switched to a new image before zooming in on the ship's hull, pointing out the same name printed on the side of the ship.

"These stills are from battle records of the Conquest and Valor, and their Captains both confirmed that the flagship they engaged with at Katina is this same ship our pilot just marked." He added.

The Admiral smiled. They'd been trying to track the identity of the Cornerian flagship with little success until one of their fighters got close enough to read the name on one of the enemy ship's hull. He died for the effort, but he'd been a veteran of Katina and survived his sortie long enough

to report what he'd seen. His death would not be in vain. They now knew which ship was commanding the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet.

They'd been smart in splitting their fleet into two groups, and Scales had to divide his own forces to face them. The enemy was trying to cut down their disadvantage, and they'd successfully maneuvered themselves so that the Grand Gambit couldn't fire upon them without destroying any of his own vessels.

"Helm, position the Grand Gambit to fire on the Eternal. Comms, inform the Captains of every ship that's sitting in the way of our main gun that they are to hold position. They are to prepare to make evasive maneuvers at short notice so that we can fire on the enemy's flagship."

"Aye aye!"

"Tactical, which of our ship's is the closest to the Eternal's position?" He asked, and a moment later he got his reply.

"Comms, I will contact the Valor myself." Scales issued his request, then returned to his chair where he produced a small headset from the armrest. "I want a direct line to Valor from my chair."

"Aye aye!" An officer from Comms replied, then gestured with his hand to signal that the connection had been made.

"Admiral Scales?" A voice appeared in his ear as the Admiral held the headset up to his head.

"Captain Hyde, we're beginning preparations to fire on the Eternal. All ships in the path of our main gun will take evasive maneuvers on my command, but your ship is the closest to the enemy. I'm sorry to inform you that you and your crew will need to abandon your ship."

"Sir?"

"With our enemy so outnumbered I do not expect them to believe we would fire on one of our own ships to win. The Valor will be the bait that keeps the Eternal from fleeing." He replied.

"I understand, Admiral. I'll hate to see her lost, but I'll begin the preparations for evacuating the Valor now. How long do we have?" The Captain asked.

The Admiral considered how long he needed. The main gun had long since cooled down from its first shot and was ready to be fired at any moment. He only needed his troops to be in position.

"Five minutes. Signal the Gambit when your crew is ready to abandon the Valor." He replied, then ended the call with the Captain. He followed up with Comms that he needed all ships to signal when they were ready to begin evasive maneuvers, and that they would have only minutes to move their ship's safely out of the gun's area of effect.

Wiping his hand across his forehead again he smiled at how things were going. This battle would not grow long in tooth. In a few minutes everything would be ready, and he could take the head right off his enemy's shoulders!

“Admiral!” an officer from Comms shouted for him, pulling his attention.

“Yes, what is it?”

“I’ve just received word from the Captain of the Bellator. His fighter squadron is engaging Arwings near The Great Fox, and one of their pilots reported seeing the wreckage of a Shogun. There is no other sign of Sergeant Mire’s team, but The Great Fox has suffered combat damage and has only two Arwings defending it.” He replied.

Scales felt hot and cold. So, Mire had failed, then. If they’d managed to damage the ship and dragged one of their pilots with them into death, then he’d have no choice but to accept their sacrifice as a gift. They’d handed him a wounded enemy, and after he took care of the Eternal, he would then target The Great Fox to finish what Mire had started.

Soon, he would take his revenge for what they did to the Emperor!

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### << C.A.S. Eternal, In Orbit around Planet Sauria >>

What was left of the Cornerian 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet was struggling to hold together. Admiral Dachshund had successfully split his forces in two, and now the Empire was being forced to do the same. So far, they’d yet to actually break apart their fleet into two separate units, but the enemy was turning their backs to each other in order to protect their flanks.

His fleet was still suffering heavy losses, which were only being mitigated by the fact that the enemy flagship couldn’t fire its main gun. So long as the Admiral kept shifting his forces around the Imperial flagship was stuck looking through a sea of its own allies, and then that weapon of theirs couldn’t be fired! With it effectively disabled that bought him some valuable time for reinforcements to arrive.

If they could just hold out a little longer, not even an hour now. His hands were beginning to jitter, and he needed to keep flexing his fingers to suppress it.

“Sir! The Virgo is reporting they’ve taken too much damage and have to retreat.” An officer from Comms shouted.

“Have them pulled back behind the Calypso and Ganymede! If they have wounded, have them shuttled to a different ship.” The Admiral commanded.

The Virgo was on the opposite side of the battlefield, but Dachshund was still their commander, and was directing the fight on two fronts. This was not his preferred way to wage war, but his sixteen years of command experience was aiding him well.

He looked up at the holograms projected overhead that showed the status of his fleet. Twelve of his ships were highlighted as red, gone. The rest were varying shades of orange with only a scant few actually unscathed, like his own Eternal. In the heart of the hologram was his enemy,



the vast fleet all displayed as white icons. So far, they'd only managed to inflict damage, but not destroy, any of their opponent's warships. The Admiral scowled.

"Admiral, we've got one Imperial ship drifting too far ahead of their front line." Someone shouted from Tactical.

"Show me!" He requested, and an officer began to alter the holographic display to show the ship, a Granby class battleship. This was a ship they'd damaged previously, but not heavily so. It was a real fighter.

"They've not yet broken from the front line, but they might be vulnerable, Sir." Tactical suggested, and the Admiral considered it. He asked what the opposing ship's distance was from the Eternal and her three escorting ships.

"She's dead ahead of us, but not within effective range of our main guns. We'd need to close the gap by another 3,000 meters."

If they could destroy at least one ship on this side of the conflict that'd be rather satisfying, he thought. The combined firepower of five Cornerian battleships could break even a Granby's sturdy shields. They weren't invincible!

"I've got motion around their ship, it looks like... small fighter craft. Dozens of them!"

"Pull in Doberman Squadron and have them ready to defend us if they come in for a sortie." He replied.

"I'm not familiar with these signatures, Sir. I don't know what kind of fighter craft they are, but they aren't heading towards our position. It looks like they are splitting apart and flying along their front line."

"A flanking maneuver?"

"No? It's difficult to track them all, but I think they are flying towards neighboring battleships."

The Admiral stood and studied the battlefield map overhead.

"What is their front line doing?" He asked.

"We've got several vessels forming up on each other in a phalanx, but... it looks like they are pulling away from the ship ahead of us?" Tactical replied.

Ahead of him the ship in question began to fire its main gun. The powerful laser reached out across space and collided with the Eternal's shields but was broken. In the distance it was clear the ship was preparing to fire again with other more distant ships beginning to fire their guns towards the Eternal, too.

"They're specifically targeting the Eternal! Pull us back, out of their effective range!" He ordered, his Helmsman reversing the ship and drawing it back with its escorts following alongside her. The Admiral narrowed his gaze at the hologram and wondered if they had a reason for targeting the Eternal, and he wagered it was because they'd deduced that it was the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet's flagship.

He scowled again, concentrating on the ship that was now leading the charge against the Eternal. It sat alone in space with the ship's closest to it...

"Admiral!" Someone from Tactical shouted, fear in his voice. "They're preparing to fire it again!"

Dachshund looked away from the hologram, watching as the man staggered back from his post, the officer locking up with fear as the rest of Tactical joined him. Far ahead of them in space, within the heart of the Imperial fleet there was a shining light sparkling from a single vessel.

"Return to your post! What is being fired?" He shouted at the dog, the Granby ahead of them fired its main gun again, the laser shattering across the Eternal's shields but causing no damage. Every man at Tactical acted as if they knew exactly what was coming, and fled their consoles and ran past him, drawing the rest of the crew into a mad dash to the rear of the cabin and the elevators that lay there.

The sparkling light ahead of them suddenly flashed bright, blinding the Admiral before the external camera's overloaded and failed. In the hologram a tunnel had opened up within the enemy's formation, and a single vessel was left to sit at its entrance. By the time Dachshund realized the Empire would sacrifice one of their own ships just to target the Eternal it was too late to do anything to stop it.

The Grand Gambit fired its main gun, a massive beam of light erupted from the nose of the ship. It first struck the Valor's stern, the heat breaking the ship down into liquid ribbons before those too evaporated like water into steam.

The crew of the Eternal and its escorts were dead before the beam even hit them. The light in the direct path of the beam penetrated through their hulls as if it were paper thin, the temperatures inside each ship sharply rising to several thousand degrees Fahrenheit in an instant, rending everything not forged of steel into billowing ash.

The beam struck, and when the light faded there was nothing left in its wake. With its commander now dead, nearly a third of the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet lay decimated in orbit around Sauria. News fit enough to make even the Emperor smile brightly.