

Chapter 10//HUBRIS

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

The bright light that had consumed the space around them began to fade and the two foxes could see again. Without any hesitation the fighting resumed, the hot streaks of laser fire lancing through space once more as soon as the pilots could line their sights up with their next target. The Empire had fired their weapon again, Fox seethed! He yanked back on the flight stick as the girl in his lap shuddered against his chest, cheeks soaked with tears as she bit down on her hand to silence her cries. As soon as the light had gone off, she went rigid, as if in terrible pain.

How many had died this time, he thought?

“Peppy? Slippy? Falco?” Fox thumbed his radio, calling out to anyone for a response.

An enemy fighter zoomed across his bow, nearly colliding with him. He banked hard to the right to follow him, a Cornerian fighter falling in next to him as they both opened fire. Their lasers nicked the enemy fighters wings, forcing the craft to lose control, then falling prey to the next volley of laser fire. The fighter erupted before his eyes and Fox quickly turned his attention to the next target on his radar.

“Fox!” Falco’s voice appeared through the static of growing radio interference.

“Falco! What the hell’s going on out there, who got hit this time?” He asked. There was a pause on the other end of the call, the bird’s breathing labored and under stress, the toll of heavy combat interfering with his usually boastful and sarcastic demeanor. There was no doubt about that. This was just like Venom; the memories of that hell were flooding back to him too quickly to recount with clarity.

“We lost Peppy.” The bird grunted, in pain.

The noise of combat around him sounded muffled, like something tight had wrapped around him, trapping him in space as the light of weapons fire reflected across the glass of his cockpit. His hands and feet were on autopilot, working their controls, his mind fixated on the task at hand while his chest began to constrict, his breathing becoming a struggle.

“We were attacked by these goons, and they got him! Slippy’s damaged bad, his radio stopped working. We can’t dock with the Great Fox anymore, there’s a hole blasted in the hangar door and the forward hangar is blocked off by the damn Landmaster! No repairs, no refuel, no resupply!” The bird shouted, the anger in his voice overtaking any calm he could have mustered. Fox could hear the bird hitting something in his cockpit with his fist.

“How many did we lose to the giant laser?” Fox asked, his own voice sounded muted to his ears.

“Dammit, Fox!” Falco shouted.

“Who did we lose!” He shouted back even louder, the world around coming back in focus, the sound returning, in his hands he felt an electric jitter he hadn’t felt in a long time. The tightness in his chest crawled nastily upwards until he felt it as a hard lump of rock rising in his throat.

A new voice entered the call, it was ROB.

“Fox, Admiral Dachshund’s ship and its four escorts have been destroyed. Captain Heeler of the C.A.S. Calypso has assumed command of the Cornerian 5th Fleet.” The robot answered when Falco couldn’t.

The girl tried to reach out to him with one arm, her body trembling hard against his, almost as if she was writhing in pain. Her hand found the edge of his vest and she clung to it, her finger brushing against the fur just below his neck, and where the painful lump ached. He thumbed his radio to switch to the Husky Squadron’s private line and shouted for Bill to respond.

“Yeah, what’s the word!” The dog shouted, Bill’s hands being just as full as everyone else’s. Fox’s eyes were darting across space around him, from his windows to his radar and back again.

“Will you be offended if I assume command of you and your squadron?” He asked, his voice sounding eerily calm, even to him.

“No, I take it you got a plan?” The dog asked.

Fox’s teeth were beginning to clench the more he thought about it, the sharp edges of his fangs threatening to break the skin if he so much as licked his own teeth. He thumbed the radio back to ROB and asked him to connect his Arwing with the acting commander, that he needed to talk to Captain Heeler, and to do it NOW! His anger was boiling hot by the time he heard a stranger’s voice speak over his headset, demanding to know what he wanted.

“There’s no point in splitting our forces like this if they’re just going to pick us off one by one! Order the fleet to advance, Captain! Every single ship!” Fox shouted, thinking back to the madness of Venom when he and his three wingmen dove through the enemy lines. All those powerful ships, their defense satellites, all of it uselessly firing past them as they punched their way down to the planet. They did more damage to themselves than they ever managed to land on the Star Fox Team!

"If we shove everything we got down their throats then they can't shoot at us without shooting themselves! We'll make every shot they take cost them twice as much to make!" Fox shouted at the other man.

"You're insane!" The Captain shouted back at him.

"If you want to stay put where it's safe and die like the Admiral, then go ahead, but if you don't do what I say then the Leader of the Star Fox Team will give the order for you, and I have just as much access to the open channel as you do! If your men are going to die today, then let them drag the Empire down with them kicking and screaming!" Fox raged, his voice coming out like a snarl the likes of which he had never heard from himself before, and the other man fell silent before killing the radio link to his Arwing.

He was vibrating in his seat, fueled by so much rage he couldn't contain it! Krystal tugged at his vest. He was shaking, his eyes were burning hot as the anger welled up in him along with the pain in his throat.

"Woah! Fox, we're getting new orders!" Bill appeared in his ear. He thumbed his radio to the Cornerian general channel.

"-to advance! We're going to penetrate the enemy line and break them from the inside! We'll make them regret ever crawling out of their stinking holes!" The Captain shouted, his shaky voice a poor replacement for Fox's rage. He thumbed his radio back to Falco and ROB. He told them both to grab Slippy and begin to advance on Fox's position, and that he was now assuming command of the Husky Squadron. He wanted to unite their forces under his direct command to make a direct assault.

He spotted his next target and laid into it with a vengeance, destroying the fighter and sending its wreckage to spin wildly out of control.

"Bill?" He asked, switching his headset again.

"Yeah, Boss?"

"The Great Fox and the rest of my team are going to form up on our position. We've got a ship to kill!" Fox said, the words tasting bitter in his mouth.

Peppy had been the last living piece of his father that he had left. Andross had taken enough from him, and now he was going to make the Empire pay if it was the last thing he did!

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

“Have they lost their minds?” An officer shouted from Tactical, the entire battlefield they’d constructed had fallen apart in minutes. The two battle lines they’d erected against the Cornerians were in shambles as the cursed dogs began to advance their ships at what could only be described as ‘suicidal’ speed.

The Admiral looked at what was happening, and he couldn’t determine if what he was seeing was a battle strategy or insanity. He leapt up from his chair, almost losing his balance, and crossed the bridge to Tactical. The injury on his side was hurting constantly now, but he wasn’t going to ask for any additional painkillers, as he was afraid that taking anymore might provoke the doctor into trying to remove him from the bridge. If he was too medicated, then it could be argued that he wasn’t fit to command and would need to visit the Infirmary. He instead leaned into the pain, letting it force his eyes open and keep him alert, the sharp sting giving him new life.

“Is there any pattern to what they are doing?” He demanded to know, his officers scrambling to decipher what their enemy was doing.

“N-no! They’re all just advancing, they’ve already broken our western line!” The officer replied.

“Admiral! I’ve got multiple Captains all wanting to know what they should do! We’re being overrun!” Someone from Comms shouted, and Scales looked to Comms, then back down to Tactical, his teeth gritting painfully.

He actually didn’t know what to do. This wasn’t even battle strategy! Had they truly gone mad with fear? They were outnumbered, outgunned, were they just trying to commit suicide!

“Is the main gun ready to fire?” He asked, but the men at Tactical looked at him like it was the Admiral that had just lost his mind.

“And who would we shoot, Sir? We’ve got no clear line of fire!” The officer shouted.

Then it hit him.

Whoever had taken command of the Cornerian fleet wasn’t a coward and they were now taking the battle straight to him! Being so outnumbered... The safest place to park themselves was right where the Grand Gambit couldn’t fire! They were now swarming his fleet, and for them to engage the Cornerians, Scales would have no choice but to order his men to risk firing on each other. His anger let up for a moment, a wicked smile forming across his lips.

“So, the dogs have spines after all.” He nearly whispered to himself, but still loud enough for his fellow officers to overhear.

“Keep the main gun in standby, we’ll fire if the opportunity presents itself! Order all ships to launch their reserves, hold nothing back! The enemy wants us to pay a heavy price for victory

today, so let's teach them that Lord Andross always paid us well!" He shouted to Comms and returned to his chair. If this fight was to be won the old-fashioned way, then so be it!

He could crush them even without the Grand Gambit's main weapon!

Meanwhile, in Engineering, the Grand Gambit's dual reactor was still pumping out power to the twin batteries. Their combined light kept the chamber brightly lit and hot like a noontime desert. Technicians monitored the reactor and were working around the clock to keep the heat building up in the main gun from overloading the firing system.

"He needs to fire it again." Boone announced to his team, studying the console and its many screens. The Kinetic Batteries were at full charge but with nowhere to send its energy. The Grand Gambit was not expending enough power, even with the shield arrays operating at full power.

"We need to throttle the output down, Doctor! Keeping it at 100% is dangerous!" An assistant shouted from his own console. Boone looked at him, then glared back down at his own displays before nodding.

He personally took the dial in hand and dropped the power coming from the reactor to 50%, a dramatic reduction, but not enough to keep the Gambit from firing with its current load. With that done there shouldn't be any concern.

"Doctor, there's no change to the batteries!" His assistant shouted again. Boone scowled and stalked over to his assistant, pushing him aside to examine the displays himself. There was no change in the power output coming from the batteries! He returned to his original post and dialed the flow of power down to 0%, an extreme measure, but necessary in this instance.

He looked to his assistant who had resumed his post and was looking back at him, shaking his head fearfully. The batteries were no longer under his control, but why? Had they set in motion a reaction that they hadn't anticipated? Is this not the method the Krazoa would have used to initiate the batteries power generation?

"Someone, contact the bridge! Tell them that it is essential that they do not stop firing the main gun, they must use up the energy!" He shouted, and his team obeyed, one of his assistants rushing away to alert the bridge. He turned back to the consoles and stared at the displays. What would the Emperor have done, if not this?

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

If hell was real, then it had come to find them, with the shining lights of gunfire and death exploding in all directions as the entirety of the Cornerian fleet wove itself into the Imperial line

like a tapestry of blood. The crimson hulled ships of the Empire bled their laser fire in all directions, striking friend and foe alike as the madness of the battlefield broke down tactics and reason alike.

“Six! No, make it seven Imps on our tail!”

“Got two more, forward of my position, in pursuit!”

“Mayday! Too many tracking on me, need bac-!”

The radio was a blur of voices in Fox’s ear as the fires of war illuminated his cockpit with every death, the girl in his lap shuddering along with the lights as the flash overhead and around them.

“Husky Squadron, we’re going to dive in fast and hit that ship! None of our weapon’s fire is making it through that forward shield, but the sides are vulnerable!” Fox shouted, the massive red weapon floating in the distance, it’s green disc-like shield hovering in front of it, stopping in its tracks every weapon’s system that was aimed at it.

His squadron all shouted in reply, and together they banked left and made their approach. They’d lost three of their pilots already, so they were only twelve strong with half their fighters in good condition. Slippy was reading between the lines to know what the plan was, his Arwing’s radio out of action, but Falco was still doing fine and leading the frog along as they rejoin Fox and his squadron.

“So, what’s our plan? How heavily armored is this thing?” Falco asked.

“No idea, but we’ll figure it out as we fly!”

Ahead of them was an Imperial cruiser, already missing one of its gun turrets, and when the full squadron of Cornerian fighters descended upon it the rest of the ships’ defense were lit up with weapons fire. As they flew by the dying ship, Fox watched it tilt rudderless into space as explosions rocked its hull and lit up its interior.

A fresh wave of Imperial fighters responded in kind, attacking their left flank, and forced Fox and the others to break away and pick their targets. The aggression coming from the Imperials this close to their flagship was frightening, like they held no fear in their hearts as friend and foe alike died around them.

The Husky Squadron weren’t the only allies making a break for the flagship. Gunfire and explosions threatened the massive ship from all angles with Cornerian battleships punching through recklessly to bridge the gap, making it impossible for the Empire to mount proper defenses. How do you fight an enemy who has lost its mind and broken through your front line, carving up your insides like a swallowed blade?

A friendly battleship fired its main gun, the massive laser colliding with the green shield protecting their target. The laser did nothing, the energy cracking against the shield and shattering in all directions before vanishing. The ship returned fire, pivoting several of its smaller guns, opening fire along with three other nearby vessels.

Fox watched the Cornerian ship cave under the pressure of four ships firing at once, its bow detonating, lights flickering across the ship as its power died. The lasers continued to fire on the dead vessel until the rest of it exploded, shrapnel scattering through space, some of it catching an Imperial vessel in its starboard side and triggering explosions within its hull.

“Push in while they’re distracted!” Fox shouted to his squad, veering his Arwing off from its pursuit of an enemy fighter and making a desperate leap towards the enemy ship. Several fighters joined him while the rest were left behind, their sorties too hot to break free of.

The giant ship turned its guns toward Fox, and opened fire, the massive beams were too easy to read, and everyone spun their fighters aside as the laser bolts streaked past them. Several lights began to flash across the ship’s hull as several circular ports began to screw open like the cap of a soda bottle, a cascade of missiles launching from the ship’s newly revealed anti-air defenses.

The missiles spiraled towards them, the wave of munitions all but guaranteed to hit their slower moving targets. Fox placed his thumb on the trigger and fired a bomb, the ball of light launching from the nose of his Arwing and detonating ahead of him as the missiles came near. Most of the missiles were destroyed, but a few survived to emerge through the smoke and light of the detonation.

Fox slammed his boosters, spinning his Arwing as if he still had a working G-Diffuser. A missile flew over his cockpit, narrowly missing him. His radar was still reading the missile, and the others that followed it. Six missiles lived, which quickly dropped to four, then two, one. Nothing left.

“Husky 04 and 09 are down, they’re down!” Someone shouted.

“All units, report! Whose still with me!” Fox shouted back.

What followed was a rapid roll call, telling Fox he had himself and four fighters with him. The rest were further behind him being swarmed by enemy fighters.

“That won’t be the last of their anti-air! They’ve gotta have more missiles than that!” Bill shouted, the dog holding steady at Fox’s side as the five fighters made their final approach towards the enemy flagship.

“Bill, you and Husky 03 plug their missile silos, the rest of you form up on me and we’ll target the first of those giant mirrors. That shields gotta be coming from those things!” He replied, several

voices agreeing with him instantly, Bill and another pilot breaking away and changing their trajectory.

Fox gunned it, pushing his wounded Arwing to its best speed, watching the massive red ship rapidly grow in size before him as he brought it within range of his lasers. The ship responded, firing its lasers again, but missing the same as before. He squeezed his trigger, and the combined fire of three space fighters destroyed the first turret they came to. Pulling back on his flight stick they leveled off and found themselves flying across the hull of the ship. Fox turned his head, looking behind him and at the backside of the massive mechanical arm that held one of the mirrors aloft.

He turned his group around, evading more deadly laser fire, and brought the shield arm into his sights and fired, his wingmen doing the same.

Their laser fire did nothing, each shot hitting but was quickly deflected by the strength of the hull's armor plating. He fired another bomb, ordering his wingmen to bail out of the way. The bomb met no resistance as it flew towards its target. When it hit, the explosion rocked the mirror, making the green shield shudder. When the light of the explosion faded Fox could see the arm had been heavily damaged, the arm only barely holding the mirror aloft as it tilted at a broken angle.

"Husky Squadron, the arms can be damaged by heavy ordinance! Lasers are useless! Bill, warn the fleet that their guns might be strong enough to take out those mirrors if they can score a direct hit!" Fox shouted, pulling away from the ship and banking around to make another pass.

Another volley of missiles was launched from their silos and Fox hesitated to use his bombs again. He only had two of those left! He fired off his lasers, his many wingmen doing the same as missiles were shot out of the sky, but not quickly enough. His boosters flared hot, and he dove between the cascade of missiles, explosions rocking his Arwing as the ordinance detonated behind him, his Arwing warning him that he was taking damage.

"Falco, you got enough bombs to help me take out those shields?" He shouted.

"Roger, just gimme a minute! Still pulling into your position, and Slippy's all over the place without his radio!" The bird shouted back, Fox then seeing an explosion to his side where a Cornerian fighter used to be. He gritted his teeth and spun his Arwing back around and made a push for another pass at the shields.

His lasers couldn't scratch this monster's hull, but the turrets weren't as well defended. He took out one missile port, then zipped past its corpse and readied his next bomb for the next shield arm, then launched it before veering off and away to safety. He didn't watch the bomb hit its target, but the light reflecting in the glass told him it landed.

"It's not out, Fox!" Bill shouted. Damn!

When he came back around, he saw two Cornerian fighters launching ballistic missiles. They weren't as powerful as the ordinance an Arwing carried, but the mirror he'd targeted was already heavily damaged. When the missiles struck the arm holding the mirror in place buckled and twisted, the mirror tilting to the side before something in the arm exploded, sending the entire structure to spin away from the ship's hull.

An enormous laser shot across the bow of the ship, narrowly missing Fox as it slammed into two Cornerian fighters. They were gone. Fox scanned the battlefield and saw an Imperial warship heading right for them to protect its flagship.

"Report, status!" Fox shouted.

"I'm here!" Bill's voice.

"Falco?" He asked.

"Yeah, yeah! And Slippy's on my wing!"

Was this all he had left? He thumbed his radio to an open Cornerian channel.

"Is there anyone close to the enemy flagship! We've got two of their shield mirrors destroyed, but we've taken heavy losses! We need backup!"

From somewhere in the distance a fresh laser lanced through space, slamming into the side of the Imperial ship that was heading their way. A Cornerian warship was now joining the fray. Beneath Fox the massive flagship was turning its guns towards the newcomer, its weapons launching volley after volley at the distance vessel.

Fox turned himself around, the girl clutching at his vest as she hung on through the twist and turns of his violent piloting. He took aim at the nearest gun turret and opened fire. A dozen direct hits landed, and the turret began to buckle, its interior lighting up with fire before detonation across the ship's hull.

"Whoever is in command of that warship needs to do something!" Fox shouted, angrily banking hard to the side to avoid another desperate volley of missiles.

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

"What do they mean?" Scales shouted at his Comms officer in a rage, responding to a plea from Engineering.

An explosion made the bridge quake beneath their feet with warning sirens signaling that more damage had been done to the ship. They were slowly losing their ability to fight back as the fighter squadron dogging their vessel continued to target their shields.

“We’ve just lost Shield Array 03!”

“Comms!” Scales shouted again over the flurry of voices on the bridge.

“Sir, they’re saying we can’t stop shooting the main gun, that we need to vent the excess power coming from the batteries. I don’t know anything more than that, Sir!” He shouted back, his hand gripping tight to his headset as he held it half on and half off his head as he tried to relay information back and forth across the battlefield.

Scales wiped his brow with his sleeve and stalked toward Tactical and demanded a report on all nearby targets. When he saw the display, he balked. There were so damn many of them! The battlefield was chaotic with ships everywhere, friend and foe alike. Comms was struggling to relay his commands with how quickly things were changing by the second.

And half of the Gambit’s arrays had been destroyed! What good was his impenetrable shield if it only protected from the front? This wasn’t how the Gambit had been designed to wage war! It was a mobile artillery unit to be used at range, and now he was paying the price for failing to maintain distance between his forces and the enemy. He gritted his teeth in anger.

And now there was no way he could open fire with the main gun in a battlefield as densely packed as this. It was then that an explosion hit the Grand Gambit’s starboard side, rocking the ship, and sending half the bridge tumbling to the floor, Scales included.

He heard a ringing in his ears as he lifted himself off the floor. The doctor had rushed to his side, helping pull him upright, and as the ringing subsided, he could hear Tactical shouting that they’d been struck on the starboard side from an enemy warship.

“Damage to deck three, sealing off the starboard passageways!”

“No casualties, but they took out another of our turrets! We’re naked on the starboard side!”

“Admiral, the Harbinger is attempting to intercept the ship that just attacked us!”

Scales shook himself off, the pain in his ribs had roared back to life as if the wound had been made anew, forcing him looking down to see the liquid epoxy seal had been pulled loose at the edges of his ribs, and there was fresh blood leaking down his side.

“Admiral, we need to retreat your wound.” The doctor approached him from behind.

“Shut up!” Scales snarled at the man before pivoting on his heel to turn away, only to find his vision rotating before him as fresh pain lanced through him nearly leaving him to pass out. He dropped to a knee but shoved himself upright with the doctor still behind him with hands out as if to render aid. Scales turned his head to the doctor and forced the man to wither under his gaze.

When the doctor had backed off Scales returned to Tactical and began issuing orders to pivot the Grand Gambit so as to protect its wounded side, and to evacuate all nonessential personnel from the ship’s starboard side. Was Grand Gambit’s hull so weak that he needed to fear one Cornerian ship, he raged!

“Sir, Engineering is still insisting that we fire the main gun!” Another officer told him, a sense of urgency growing in the man’s voice. Scales looked up from Tactical and out at the battlefield sprawled out around him, and the many potential targets he had before his eyes. Every ship he could destroy was locked in battle with two or three of his own ships.

“And how exactly are we to fire the main gun without slaughtering our own forces!” He snarled back.

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

“Captain, we’ve got five minutes on shields, tops! Engineering can’t keep them online any longer than that!”

“I need it to last longer than that, dammit!” The Doberman snarled; the ship then suddenly rocked beneath his feet as another volley of laser fire erupted across the Eversor’s shields. Captain Friedrich’s vessel had been at the very front of their advance into the enemy’s lines, and now as his ship shuddered with every impact against its shields, he resisted the urge to feel fear.

Right dead ahead of them was their target! The enormity of the Imperial flagship was looming ahead of them, and they were being dogged by pesky flies, and there was a pissant battleship in their way! They’d already punched one hole into its side, but now they were going to give it another!

“Another warship approaching from above! Brace fo-“ his officer couldn’t finish his sentence before they were again rocked back by another hard hit across their shields.

“Fire!” He shouted, and the forward guns of his ship lashed out at the ship ahead of them, striking into its injured side, tearing through what remained of its hull. The ship began to sag in the middle as it vented it’s guts out into space, the ship’s interior an echoing mess of fire and explosions as the ship’s internal structure collapsed.

His crew cheered, but the flagship was still ahead of them, their real target.

“What’s that topside ship doing!” The Captain shouted.

“It’s maintaining its approach! Terrier Squadron is asking if they need to break off their attack and return to base!”

“No! They are to not abandon their target! The flagship is their only priority, not us!”

As his communications officer relayed that command to what remained of his Terrier Squadron, the Captain focused again on the battlefield around him. He had far too few allies around the Eversor, but there was a growing swarm of fighters moving onto the Imperial flagship. What had been a small flame at first, was now a raging inferno.

“Captain, we’re getting a request from the Star Fox Team!”

“Which is?” He shouted just as the ship rocked again under weapons fire. The Empire did not take kindly to losing one of their own and now there were at least two battleships opening fire on the Eversor. It was only by the good grace of his ship’s shields that they could weather this storm. He’d already lost his two escorting cruisers...

“They want us to help destroy the flagship’s shields!”

They were slowly closing the gap between them and the Imperial flagship, and in front of it Captain Friedrich could see the massive disc of green energy. The field of energy was stopping everything that was fired at it and protected the bow of the ship which doubled as the barrel for the ship’s main cannon.

“Push us forward then! This doesn’t change our target, or our objective! Coordinate with the Squadron to determine where our cannon fire needs to go!” He shouted back, returning to his chair, and continuing the fight from his seat as the hull shuddered around him as his shields endured yet another barrage.

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

“We’ve got one warship coming to assist, and about ten extra fighters!” Bill shouted.

Fox was relieved to hear that, and The Great Fox was now on its own approach vector as it punched through the enemy lines to make for the Imperial flagship. He struggled to maintain the battlefield in his head, each fighter, each ship, like a chess piece on the board.

As the pieces all moved, he plotted what he should next do, who he should next reach out to, to give an order, and which pieces needed knocking over next. Despite losing half its shield generators, and most of its armaments the flagship wasn't faltering! He thumbed his flight stick and readied a bomb but hesitated to press the button. It was his last one, and he feared he might need it later.

Falco and Slippy still had munitions of their own, and they were already here, and then with The Great Fox backing them up from behind they'd have some long-range artillery to rely on.

Two allied warships and... more than a dozen fighters. This had to be enough to kill this ship!

"Angry." The girl whispered, her hand squeezing at his collar as she clung to him.

"What?" He asked, jerking the flight stick to the side and rolling his Arwing to the right as an enemy fighter shot across his ship. The light of laser fire illuminated the interior of his cockpit for a moment, turning them both pink before the darkness of space returned and Fox could see clearly ahead of him again. He tapped his foot on the peddle and triggered his boosters, sending his Arwing, and his new pursuer through a chase around the underside of the flagship's hull.

The ship was so huge it wasn't a quick journey, and the enemy fighter had a slight speed advantage over his Arwing's limping engine.

"I can hear a voice." Krystal tried to say, her voice coming out too dry. She felt dehydrated after all these hours of having nothing to sustain her, but the voice she could hear over all the others was too loud, and too familiar, for her to ignore, and too important for Krystal to not say something.

"Yeah?" Fox replied, distracted, jerking back on the flight stick just as he cleared the other side of the ship, rolling his Arwing up and into a fake U turn that fooled his pursuer into pulling his own ship into a full Immelmann, his fighter tipping upside down before the pilot spun himself right-side up to match the orientation of the flagship.

Seeing this, Fox, now flying vertically, finished his turn, and hit his boosters a second time. With his speed now momentarily faster than his prey he completed his own delayed Immelmann and fell into line behind his target while holding down the trigger of his lasers. As soon as he had a lock, he let the charged bolt fly. The enemy pilot tried to bank left to avoid the shot, but as it chased him Fox jerked his own fighter to the side and fired leading shots ahead of him.

Laser fire struck the fighter's port side right before the charged shot plowed into its stern killing it swiftly. Krystal shuddered, feeling the sudden painful voice of another life just before it vanished.

"I think it's him!" She choked out, breathing through her mouth as she struggled to keep it together. So many people were dying all around her! She could hear Fox's confusion, he didn't

know who 'he' was, but she had to tell him. "The Admiral! The big man that attacked you, he's on this ship!"

"Well, that would sense!" He replied, his thoughts telling her more than his voice could. Of course, the enemy leader would be on their flagship, and she almost felt silly herself.

"He's angry! He- He can't find anything to shoot!" She explained, her ability to hear voices was limited, but that single powerful voice was so familiar to her that it sang louder than all the others. She could still see his face in her mind from when he'd looked down at her in the Central Chamber, when she'd spat at him, and then again when he'd been glaring down at Fox as he tried beating him senseless on the floor.

There was so much growing anger and incredible pain in this man's voice. With every word his mind spoke it echoed with a tremor of something terrible, like a dam was holding something back but threatened to break at any moment.

"Then my idea is working!" Fox replied with triumph, knowing that with the battlefield in such a state as it was now that there were no clean targets for the flagship to aim at. Krystal, too, felt relief from this, but that terrible something being held back in the Admiral filled her with fear. Today was the first day in her life that she'd ever tasted desperation on her lips, and now she felt that same flavor coming from within that enormous ship.

There were a handful of smaller voices whose words she couldn't hear, but they were energetic and filled with fear, too. There were people inside that ship desperate to stop something, but she didn't know what it was.

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

The sweat was now pouring down Dr. Boone's face as he and his team desperately tried to find a solution to the growing threat that spun before them. The twin eyes of the spider that had so captivated the doctor now left him frightened. They could not devise a way to shunt power from the batteries to stop them from overloading!

Everything they had done had been by Lord Andross' design! His notes were clear, and the schematics were all crafted by his own hand, and yet what could they have missed? Was there a key element they had overlooked in his research, or could the Emperor himself not have foreseen this as a possibility? Surely not!

"The shields are pulling even less power now! Arrays 01 and 03 are offline, and 02 is damaged and may soon fail!" One of his assistants shouted from his console, and the doctor quickly moved to his side to check the readouts. The shield arrays had been one of the two largest sources of power drain with the other being the rest of the ship's systems! The Grand Gambit

was suffering nonfatal damage all across its hull with a number of its defense systems being put offline by the Cornerians.

With every blow they endured, no matter how small it might have been, the power being pulled away from the Kinetic Batteries grew ever smaller, and with that the twin crystals spun ever faster. Their brilliant glow was too great to look at now without eye protection, and the ambient heat was skyrocketing within the confines of engineering. Technicians were working nonstop to try and devise a means of using heatsinks to keep the temperature from rising any higher, but it appeared that a terrifying inevitability was looming before him.

Why was the Admiral not firing the ship's main weapon? That was the thing; the only thing, that could save them now. He must fire the cannon!

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

Meanwhile, the Eversor's shields had finally failed, and the Imperial warship that lay ahead of them felt out of reach even though they'd come so close.

An explosion on the ship's port side threw the crew to the floor on every deck of the Eversor, sending them scrambling back to their feet as warning sirens echoed through the corridors with red light filtering through every fixture as their vessel began suffering critical failures.

The ship was struck again in the same spot.

"We've lost contact with Deck 2! Dead air!"

"Captain, Engineering reports the reactor is going to fail!"

"Captain, I've just lost power to the forward guns!"

"Captain!"

Captain Friedrich picked himself up and held tight to the side of his chair as he glared out at the Imperial flagship, which was just out of reach. His ship was going to die, and his teeth clenched painfully.

"Order the crew to evacuate! All hands are to board the nearest escape pod and..."

Where could they escape to that wasn't a warzone?

“Pray that you all make it home.” He finished his sentence, and the officer standing now at the Communication console turned to look at him, then back to his console and began to broadcast the command to evacuate across the ship, including the Captain’s last words.

The Doberman was too proud to flee with his crew and approached his Helmsman and told him he was relieved of duty and was to evacuate.

“But Sir...”

“Evacuate! Everyone on the bridge evac now!” He shouted at everyone on the bridge, including the officer at Comms. He gave them all a glare and the men slowly began to move from their posts just as another hit landed on their side, knocking everyone to the floor. The Captain grabbed the edge of the console and pulled himself upright, reaching up to his face to find that he’d split his lip open on the way down.

“Everyone out!” He shouted again, and the crew began to scramble, making their way off the bridge and to the executive escape pod mounted behind the rear of the bridge.

Standing once more at the Helm of his ship he set the controls to manual and began to punch the engines to their fullest, hoping that everyone in Engineering had done their due diligence and made it to the escape pods. This console couldn’t tell him if pods were being jettisoned, but he knew his crew was well trained in emergency protocol.

The Eversor would die today, but it would do so proudly! The Captain set his trajectory, and let the ship burn at full thrust with the flagship as his target. He would personally guide the ship to its final resting place.

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

“Fox!” she shouted in fear as a powerful laser lanced overhead, blinding her with its light. Fox jerked the flight stick and pulled them away from danger, the audio from his headset just barely audible over his heavy breathing. She watched him from below, still clinging to him even as the pain in her side grew ever stronger. Krystal was in so much pain, and she kept feeling lightheaded as the emotions of the battlefield blended with her own suffering, leaving her feeling weak and threatening to knock her unconscious.

But she couldn’t close her eyes now! Something terrible was going to happen!

“Dammit!” Fox shouted, and she felt him bank his Arwing hard to the left. She couldn’t see clearly out of the cockpit like he could, but something new was happening around them.

“What is it doing?” He asked, and she could hear the words in his head, too. There was a ship, one of their own, flying straight at the big ship they were all trying to destroy.

She couldn't feel this other ship, or who was on it, but within Fox she felt a terrible anger and desperation. Outside the Arwing the fighting had reached a new intensity. The Great Fox was now within range of the Grand Gambit, but it had approached from the flagship's front, and its forward shields were still online. They'd yet to cripple the last two arrays!

“A damn suicide run!” Fox shouted, the information streaming into his ear telling him everything he needed to know. The ship that had come in for the rescue was going down, and in its death throes the Captain of the ship was going to use it as a battering ram!

He couldn't hesitate any longer and spun his Arwing back around until the flagship was again within his sights with its forward shields in view. They'd damaged one of the arrays already, but he'd been saving his last bomb, afraid to use it, but now it was too late! He could have done more sooner, and now another of their ships was going to sink!

Two enemy fighters put their sights on him as he made his approach, but he handled them, and launched his last bomb. He couldn't afford to watch it hit its target and spun his ship out of harm's way as laser fire erupted all around him. They were outnumbered two to one now even with the arrival of the Terrier Squadron!

“Did you get it!” Falco shouted over his radio. Fox didn't know!

“Woo hoo!” Another voice shouted, but Fox couldn't tell if it was Bill's or another canine from Terrier. The open channel between them was a flurry of communications, updates, reports, roll calls, warnings, and may days. The stream of consciousness from a dozen other pilots was filling his ears and keeping him updated, and he now knew that his bomb had hit its target and the shield had flickered again. The overlapping layers of energy were falling one by one as they took each arm of the array down.

“Last one!” He shouted into his headset.

Fox didn't want to leave anything to chance. If Andross went through all the trouble of designing shields to protect the front of the ship, then he wasn't going to gamble that he could destroy it by attacking it from its sides. They'd already heavily damaged it, but the ship wasn't dying even as they left scorch marks and craters all over its surface!

He felt a hand grab at his wrist and push, a laser flashing over the cockpit just as he was about to pull back on his flight stick. Fox looked down at the girl, who'd let go of his shirt and was now holding her hand on his wrist. She looked terrible, but if her mind reading was working, then that meant she could help in some small way. Like keeping him from tipping his nose up into enemy fire.

A new flurry of activity exploded over the radio as the Eversor began to suffer critical failure. He pulled his ship around and watched as the ship, smaller than the Imperial flagship, coasted forward at great speed towards the enemy. Its hull was heavily damaged, leaking debris into the space around it as it carried out its last will. The now dead ship bore a deep wound where the bridge had once been, where Imperial forces had desperately tried to stop its advance.

Behind him the flagship was beginning to shift, making an obvious maneuver to avoid a collision.

“Dammit!” He shouted, knowing that it’d miss.

What was left of the Eversor flew past him, its corpse barreling towards the enemy. The underside of the ship collided with the enemy’s bow, but only just. It could only scrape across the other ship’s hull as it glided by. Fox thumbed his radio to contact The Great Fox.

“ROB! Fire at the Eversor! Fire at it!” He screamed.

Off in the distance a pair of twin lasers flashed, and their payload streaked through space to hit its target. The Eversor was struck in the middle as it was about to clear the Imperial ship, and something ruptured in its middle. The ship detonated, sending shrapnel and debris scattering through space to rip and tear at the Imperial flagship’s tough exterior.

As Fox watched, hoping that the destruction had been enough, the final shield array began to flicker. Krystal pulled at his wrist.

“No!” She screamed, her voice cracking.

“What? What is it!” He asked her, the enormous ship began to move again, crawling out from beneath the ruined corpse of the Eversor.

“He wants to fire it again! He’s looking at your ship!” She cried.

His ship? The flagship wasn’t pointed at his Arwing.

“The Great Fox!” She cried again, tugging at his hand. He yanked the flight stick to the side and spun his Arwing around towards The Great Fox’s position. The two ships were still a distance apart, but well within each other’s firing range, but the last shield array was still online! All the Eversor had done was make it flicker!

He hit his boosters and flew towards the array, shouting on an open channel for everyone to fire at the array with anything they had left. Laser fire that had previously been streaking across space in every direction began to stop, then began again in a new direction as pilots all began to heed his call, drawing their fire towards the array.

The laser fire wasn't going to cut it! Fox added his own lasers to the mix, but the array's armor was too tough, even if damaged! He didn't know what to do, the girl clinging tight to his arm as he struggled to think of a solution.

Then the shield shut off on its own.

"What?" He asked out loud as cheers erupted on the open channel.

"No, no!" Krystal began to weep, almost hysterical, clawing at his chest with her hand desperately as she recoiled from the view ahead of them. The array began to move, rotating backwards and out of the way before locking into a new position. The barrel was now exposed, and a bright light began to shine out from the front of the ship.

"He's going to shoot it!" She sobbed, jerking at his vest as she wailed.

"ROB, fire again! Fire at the ship! Fire at the ship, ROB!" He cried out, his desperation matching the girl's in lock step. The flagship below them grew even brighter, with nearby ships caught in its firing path losing control before exploding from the incredible heat of that fearsome light.

Then The Great Fox struck back.

His ship fired, its powerful twin lasers finding purchase on the flagship, piercing right down the middle of the main gun's barrel! The light of green lasers blended with the searing white of the main gun, then an explosion erupted from deep within the ship as the light flickered and faded. More cheering erupted over the radio as his pilots celebrated. Fox breathed a sigh of relief, the tightness in his chest letting go at last as the fear that had gripped him faded along with that terrible light.

"No!" Krystal shouted, yanking at his arm again, desperately trying to make him pull his flight stick to the side.

"What's the matter!" He shouted back at her, yanking himself from her grip only for her to grab tight to him again.

"We have to run!" She screamed, Fox looking down to see her looking back at him with a look of horror that left him pale.

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

Admiral Scales spit a mouthful of blood out onto the floor as he picked himself up again, his wound having been torn back open, and the whole side of his uniform was now soaked through with blood. He couldn't hear anything over the ringing in his ears, then hands came to grab him

from his side. He turned his head and saw the doctor trying to pull him away, but he yanked his arm free and shoved the man back. The pain ripping through his body was unlike anything he'd ever felt.

The bridge around him was in a state of chaos, his officers shouting at each other, shouting to him, but he still couldn't hear anything but a muffled silence. The red lights of danger were now active on the bridge, casting everything in a crimson hue of death. When the doctor returned to his side, the ape had brought a soldier with him.

"Sir!" The soldier shouted; fear etched onto his face as he warily approached his commanding officer. The ringing began to fade, the sound of the bridge around him replacing it. What he found was that his ship appeared to be dying. Warning klaxons were screaming at the crew, and they were screaming at each other to evacuate the ship.

"Status report!" Scales shouted.

"Sir, we have to abandon ship!" The soldier next to him replied, the doctor again trying to take the Admiral by the arm, but he ripped it away.

"No! Why didn't the gun fire!" He jerked himself back to Tactical, saw that no one was posted there. Where were his officers! What now remained of the bridge crew appeared to be standing at Comms, barking orders elsewhere. Even his Helmsman had abandoned his post!

"The weapon is disabled, Sir! We were shot inside the barrel before it could fire!" The doctor shouted back in reply, forcing himself between Scales at the rest of the bridge, putting his hands on his chest and trying to push him back towards the rear exit.

"Admiral, we need to get you to one of the shuttles!" The soldier behind him pleaded. Scales looked back to him, then back towards the front of the bridge, at the carnage that sat in space around his ship. No.

No!

The Grand Gambit could not possibly be defeated!

He shoved the doctor aside and stumbled his way back to Tactical. He smashed several buttons, desperate to reactivate the main gun, before grabbing the lever that would fire it. He yanked it down, but nothing happened.

"Sir, please!" A voice from behind. He yanked the lever up and down, his frustration boiling into anger as the gun refused to fire. He looked up at the window in front of him as a hand grabbed him by the arm. Somewhere in the distance was The Great Fox! He had them in his sights, he'd almost had them!

“Dammit!” She screamed at the window, and at everything beyond it.

Something beneath him detonated within the ship, shaking the bridge, and knocking everyone that remained to the floor. Deep in the ship, Engineering had already been evacuated. Every attempt to deactivate the twin Kinetic Batteries had failed, and they were now spinning faster than 50,000 rpms each. Together they produced a light far brighter than a star that scorched the interior of the chamber, incinerating everything that wasn't made of metal, and now even the metal began to give, pouring like red sludge off the ceilings and walls as the catwalks collapsed to the floor below them like molten rain.

The Grand Gambit's main gun was dead, the internal damage to its barrel too extensive to allow the weapon to fire again. Even so, the light from within Engineering began to bleed out through the ship until the Gambit's bow began to glow white once more.

As the Admiral staggered to his feet, clawing his way up to brace himself against the Tactical console, he saw the white light emanating from the front of his ship.

“Yes!” He shouted in triumph, blood spitting from his mouth as he watched with a manic grin, his teeth stained with blood.

“Bathe them all in fire!” He shouted and grabbed the lever again and pulled it.

Though nothing happened, the white light grew brighter still. The soldier had already fled, leaving the Admiral and the doctor alone on the bridge. Looking to the Admiral, then at the destruction around him, the doctor too fled the bridge.

The light grew brighter, and then there was a sudden and sharp increase in temperature. The bridge began to cook, the flesh of the Admiral's hand was scorched by the lever, forcing him to rip it off, bits of his flesh being left behind as the flooring began to melt through the soles of his boots.

Admiral Scales had already tasted pain today, but what he experienced now was something different. As his ship died around him, he bore witness to his own oblivion as the twin eyes of the spider finally began to rupture, tearing the ship apart and scattering the Admiral's corpse into ash as the ship's hull was torn asunder from the inside.

The Grand Gambit had fallen, and with it, the rest would surely follow.

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

Krystal pleaded with Fox to go faster, to get as far away as he could! Fox couldn't have held a tighter grip on the flight stick as his foot pumped the pedal, forcing his boosters to push his

Arwing, and its engine, to its limit. Warning lights were flashing on his console, klaxons crying out as the engines screamed behind them.

“Please, we have to go faster!” She cried.

“Everyone, evacuate! Get away from that ship, now! Get as far away as possible!” Fox shouted into his headset, using an open channel that everyone could hear, even the Empire.

Behind them the enemy’s flagship was glowing bright, as if a new star had formed just outside Saurian orbit, consuming the vessel until there was nothing left. Further still, the light was advancing, incinerating everything it touched, everything that had failed to escape the now rapidly expanding ground zero of the flagship’s destruction.

Fox knew that if that ship blew up just as the Force Point Temple had, then everything around it would be good as gone! A new warning appeared on his console, telling him that he was risking a critical engine failure if he didn’t stop firing his boosters, but what choice did he have?

As the light behind them grew brighter still his Arwing began to shudder, the lack of any shielding leaving it fully exposed to the intense heat ripping through space around him. More sirens, and more lights, began to appear on his console.

Krystal, wracked with pain, felt the chorus of voices around her thinning, hundreds upon hundreds of people dying in sharp moments of agony as the light consumed more of the battlefield.

Suddenly, the Arwing lurched, and the debris floating in space around them began to fly past them as if it was all being yanked through space by a powerful force. Fox fought against it, gripping tighter to the flight stick as his ship began to vibrate and rattle. The glass of the cockpit began to crack, new sirens screaming of even greater danger!

His engines failed, the whole console going red with system failures. The space around them was being consumed by that terrible light as his Arwing was pulled backwards, spinning out of control. Krystal wept as she put out her hand to embrace the man who had carried her this far, and in return he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight as their ship was enveloped with light, and then everything went dark.