

Chapter 11//ASCENSION

<< Somewhere in Saurian Orbit >>

It was cold. Really cold.

White lines were in front of him, like a spider's web, wrapping Fox up in a cocoon of biting ice. With each breath he drew he knew it might be his last, and the shaking of his hands wouldn't stop. The glass of his cockpit was cracked from corner to corner, slowly bleeding out what little oxygen he had left, and without power his ship could no longer keep him warm.

The girl.

He held her unconscious body in his arms, holding the plastic mask to her face so that she might live longer than he would, the mask feeding her the emergency reserve of oxygen stored behind his seat.

Looking out past the spider's web of cracks in the glass he saw the grim fate of many. Wreckages of fighters and warships littered the space around him, and then his hands stopped shaking. He was too weak for even hypothermia to give him the jitters. He'd lose consciousness soon.

Maybe the girl would make it. She'd been through enough.

"I didn't see you this time." He mouthed the words as his vision began to fade. This time, there had been no voice to guide him to safety as death chased him down in his Arwing. His father's voice had abandoned him. Was it because he was meant to meet him face to face this time, at the very end?

As he faded, something popped, but he couldn't see anymore. He lost consciousness as his cockpit was ejected from the wreckage of his Arwing. A pair of canines in space suits had him now, but he was no longer aware that help had finally arrived as a fleet of ships slowly combed the wreckages of friend and foe alike in search of any survivors, of which there were unfortunately far too few.

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

In thirty minutes, the clock would mark the twenty fourth hour since he'd been recovered from the battlefield. The C.A.S. Ferratus, along with the rest of the Cornerian 2nd Fleet, had arrived only a half hour past the destruction of the Imperial flagship, whose identity had now been

confirmed as the Grand Gambit. A total of forty-seven POWs had been brought into custody for questioning and were presently being held in the Ferratus' brig under twenty-four-hour guard, as well as being placed under suicide watch.

Most of the past day had been spent asleep, with Fox gliding in and out of consciousness as nurses checked his vitals, fed him medication, his body struggling to cope with everything it'd been put through.

When he finally regained consciousness, and could actually keep his eyes open, he at last felt like he was awake.

The infirmary on the Ferratus was impressive. It was the largest ship in the fleet, having only been commissioned after the war's end. It was also General Pepper's personal flagship. When Fox sat upright in his bed, fingers tugging curiously at the blue paper gown he'd been changed into, a male nurse rushed to his side.

"Take it easy, you've been through a lot, Sir." The canine said, his voice as gentle as a nurse's should be, but Fox waved him off.

"Been through worse. I feel alright." He replied, but it was a white lie. He still felt aches and pains, but that was to be expected considering what he'd endured.

The nurse pulled out a small flashlight and instructed Fox to follow the light as he shined it in his eyes. He began a series of other routine tests, checking his vitals and making sure Fox was fit enough to be sitting upright at all.

"What's happened?" Fox asked.

The nurse paused, choosing his words carefully.

"I've heard that the search and rescue operation is still ongoing, but they haven't brought anyone new to Medical in over two hours. If there's anyone else out there, they're running out of time." He replied.

"I take it we won?"

"That depends on what your definition of winning is, Sir. The casualties are... very high." The nurse replied. Fox nodded.

"I'd like to see the rest of my team. Can I get clearance to move about Medical?" He asked, not even knowing if his team still existed.

"You're not in as bad a shape as you were when you first came in, Mr. McCloud. I'll talk to Dr Roscoe, forwarding him your request."

“Thank you.” He replied.

The room he was in wasn't private. Just a three walled cubicle filled with the kind of medical equipment you'd expect of a hospital, complete with a fabric curtain acting as the fourth wall you'd enter in from. Without waiting for permission, he slid his legs off the bed and hopped to the floor, the cool steel making him shiver, but it helped wake him up.

His knee wasn't aching as bad as it had been before, and he pulled aside the paper gown and found that the injury he'd taken to the knee had been given proper stitches and a bandage, replacing the primitive medicines the EarthWalker tribe had treated him with. He still had a headache, his fingers reaching up to feel the small lumps on his scalp from where he'd taken a beating from that lizard. Those were going to smart for the next couple of days.

Scanning the room, he found the remains of his uniform folded onto a small metal table. It looked like someone had taken the time to clean them but didn't bother repairing them. His pants still had the tear in the side where that arrow had hit him. He pulled the curtain shut and changed out of his gown and into his uniform, finding his boots on the floor by the end of the bed. At least they were kind enough to leave his clothing.

The nurse returned, not acting surprised that his patient had changed into something more comfortable.

“Dr Roscoe gives his permission to move about Medical, Sir. He requests that you do not leave, please. He still needs to review the results of your CT scan.”

“I promise not to wander far. Where is my team?”

The nurse beckoned him to follow, and Fox let the dog lead the way, following him out of his cubicle and down the corridor. He passed by more than dozens of other patients, all pilots and sailors, and he wasn't even being given a tour of the whole infirmary. There were more corridors than this. The number of injuries he saw was depressing. So many good men knocked right on their asses and worse.

“Here, Mr. McCloud.” The nurse said, moving to a curtain and pulling it aside and revealing a pair of men standing next to a bed.

Fox's heart felt lighter seeing Slippy and Falco not only safe, but for seeing them at all for the first time in more than two days. His smile faded when the two men turned their attention to him with a figure laying in the bed behind them.

“Fox!” Slippy shouted, rushing to greet him, and coming in for a hug. Falco looked at him with his usual wry humor, and stepped away from the bed to join Slippy, but not with a hug but a wing on the shoulder.

Fox's eyes were glued on the man lying in bed. It was Peppy.

He broke free of his wingmen and rushed to the bed, his light heart growing heavier again as he watched the elderly rabbit breathing deeply, an oxygen mask affixed to his face, tubes and wires stuck to him. A machine was next to the bed reading off all kinds of medical nonsense Fox didn't know how to decipher.

"He's alright, Fox." Falco said, coming up from behind him and putting a hand back on his shoulder.

"The doctor says he's in bad shape, but he'll get better." Slippy added, coming around to Fox's opposite side.

"I thought he was dead." Fox whispered, his grief returning, him feeling like it was almost too good to be true.

"He almost didn't make it. His radio was out, got knocked offline just like Slippy's when he ejected his cockpit from his Arwing so he couldn't call for help. He was just floating in space. It's almost a miracle. If he hadn't bit the dust where had then that big explosion would have gotten him." Falco added.

"When rescue found him, he'd passed out from his injuries. They think that's the only reason he didn't die of asphyxiation. Being knocked out kept his breathing slow, didn't use up as much air." Falco continued, and Fox kept listening as he watched the elderly man sleep.

He reached up to run a hand across his cheek and his wingmen didn't say anything as Fox regained his composure. He found Peppy's hand and squeezed it, the gratitude he felt for whoever spotted him was overwhelming.

"First good news I've heard in 24 hours."

"The rest of the news you'll be getting is a mixed bag. Get ready for some bittersweet dessert." Falco replied.

"And what's that?" Fox asked, reluctantly pulling his hand away from the bed before turning to face his companions.

"They don't know where the Empire went. That big ass explosion wiped out dozens of ships, but it didn't get everyone. Every Imperial ship that wasn't caught in the explosion bailed out, and none of us were in any condition to pursue them."

"But they're supposed to have already started sending out recon teams to start looking." Slippy added.

Fox reached up and rubbed the spot between his eyes. If the Empire was capable of hiding themselves away for eight years, then they'd just go right back to doing what they're clearly very good at. There were so many places to hide ships in the Lylat System that a handful of recon teams wasn't going to be enough. It'd take a staggering effort to track down every last trace of the Empire.

"It's a start." Fox replied, unimpressed.

A nurse entered, asking them to make room for him, and the three men stepped aside to let the nurse do his job in caring for Peppy. Fox looked at his wingmen and was glad that they at least were spared the worst of it. Fox had taken his share of injuries, but looking back at Peppy, he knew many others had suffered far worse.

Then there was the girl!

He suddenly thought of her, the teenager! Krystal was her name.

"I want to go check on another patient." He told the two men and stepped out of Peppy's cubicle while they waited for the nurse to finish checking his patient.

It took a moment for Fox to get the attention of a nurse who could stop and help him. The infirmary was so large he'd have to search every room to find her, and he didn't want to harass men for directions who didn't deserve it. He was finally directed to a room in the far corner of Medical, which was apparently where they'd decided to board any injured civilians.

When he approached the small cubicle that housed the girl, she was already looking in his direction as he stepped into view, like she'd been watching him approach from the start.

"How're you doing?" He asked.

The girl smiled, but the gesture was weak. She looked exhausted.

"I'm ok. I learned they don't do anything for broken ribs. I just have to let them heal on their own." She replied, her voice very quiet.

"Got you on painkillers?"

He approached her bed and put his hands on the plastic railing. The girl was lying flat with an IV drip in her arm, dressed in a blue gown like all the other patients. Fox could see it in her face that she was suffering, looking like death, the grey under her eyes he'd first seen in his Arwing had gotten worse.

"Yes. I'm just really tired, and..." She started but stopped to take in a difficult breath.

“And?”

“I can still hear everything.” She replied, her voice beginning to crack as she shut her eyes, Fox watching the girl as she struggled to contain her tears.

“Like on Sauria? And my Arwing?” He asked.

She nodded.

“There are so many people that are hurt.” Her lip was beginning to tremble, but she controlled herself. “And they’re frightened. Everyone is afraid.”

He nodded back. There were a lot of reasons to be afraid now.

“It’s hard to sort through the voices. What happened?” She asked, finding renewed strength from somewhere. Fox could only shake his head.

“Hard to say. There was the explosion, and a lot of ships were lost. Ours and theirs. Whatever was left of the Empire fled, and the military has sent out some search teams to look for them. I don’t think they’ll find anything.”

She shut her eyes and he watched her face, the way she set her jaw and struggled to contain all the emotions she had roiling inside her. How long had she been conscious, he wondered? Was she just laying here listening to all the pain and suffering around her, carrying the combined weight of every heavy heart and tortured spirit?

He didn’t envy her at all, lying trapped in her own personal hell.

“Don’t say that.” She said, her voice cracking as she battled her emotions. He should have known better that she could hear his thoughts, especially this close.

“I’m sorry.” He replied.

“How are you parents?” He changed the subject. “The rest of your colleagues?”

It took a moment, but she took in a deep and quiet breath, regaining control of herself once more even as her eyes looked like the water works were about to begin at any moment.

“They’re doing alright. When they were found they were all cold. Doctors said some had hypothermia and frostbite, but they’ll get better. My parents are safe. I haven’t gotten to see them yet, but I can feel them somewhere on the ship.”

“That’s good!” He told her with some cheer, hoping to uplift the mood. “I’m sure they’re keeping everyone that’s not a patient outside while everyone recovers. There’s a lot of people in the infirmary and I bet the doctors don’t want to be bothered while they work.”

For the first time she lifted her hand from the bed, weak as she seemed to be, and reached out to touch his hand.

“Is he ok?” She asked.

Fox didn’t reply, uncertain as to who ‘he’ was.

“Your father.” She replied.

He froze, remembering his father, his face, his voice. In his confusion he didn’t know what to say to the girl.

“No... He’s not your father, but you still care about him.” Krystal replied to his stunned silence.

Peppy was like a father, wasn’t he?

“He’s unconscious now, but we’re told he’ll recover. He took some bad injuries during the fighting. Thought he’d died.” He replied.

“I hope he’s ok, Mr. McCloud.”

He reached up and rubbed a thumb under one eye, smiling now after hearing a second person call him ‘mister’.

“Fox. You don’t have to call me mister.” He laughed. “But thanks.”

“Yo, Fox!” Falco startled him, but Krystal had already turned her head to look behind him and at the gap in the curtained wall where the bird now stood with Slippy by his side.

“Got something?” He turned and asked.

“General Pepper wants to see us on the bridge.” The bird replied, and Fox nodded in agreement.

“Duty calls, but I’ll keep in touch to make sure you’re alright, ok?” He turned back to the girl and assured her he’d be back. She smiled and wished him luck, pulling her hand away from his so he could leave.

After the three men left the infirmary Slippy asked if that was the girl Fox had rescued, to which he confirmed it was.

“She’s cute, but I don’t think you’re enough of a Casanova to turn a damsel into a dame.” Falco remarked, and Fox shook his head and hoped the girl didn’t hear him either with her ears or in her head.

When they reached the bridge, they were directed to a room attached to the side of the main chamber. The interior was warm with red carpet and a large wooden desk in the corner. It was the nicest Captain’s cabin Fox had ever seen with a large circular table in its center with a hologram of Sauria projected above it. Around that table were several figures looking like they were Cornerian top brass, and among them was the General himself.

“Fox McCloud! It is good to see you made it back from Sauria in one piece.” The General said the moment he caught sight of the trio.

Fox lifted his hand in salute with Falco and Slippy doing the same. They weren’t really members of the Cornerian military, but in the presence of so much brass Fox felt it best to play ball.

There was a heavy air in the room that wasn’t coming from the ventilation. Not including the General, there were six other men of rank standing around the hologram, and each of these men appeared to be accompanied by some kind of adjutant. Between them all Fox saw enough chevrons and medals that you could build a new Arwing with all the materials.

Were these all Admirals? He thought Corneria had more top brass than this, but he wasn’t sure. He never kept up too much with the politics of the Cornerian military.

“General.” Fox nodded, then put his hand down and assumed a relaxed posture.

The older dog looked him over briefly, then cast his eyes to the other two before nodding to them all. Fox didn’t feel like now was the time for casual banter, so he kept himself brief.

“Gentleman, now that the Star Fox Team is here, we can continue our debriefing. We’ve already compiled a report regarding the battle in orbit, but we have little understanding of what happened to you on the planet. Fox, I want you to describe to us what happened on Sauria over the past 24 hours.” The General told him.

There was a lot to tell, and Fox described it as best as he could, starting with him landing his Arwing in the jungle and carrying on from there. Periodically, one of the brass would stop him to clarify a detail or to ask a question, and Fox did his best to comply.

“After I hijacked a shuttle I was able to return to the Force Point Temple. The entrance had sustained heavy damage from a laser cannon. The pilot of the shuttle led me to believe that it was caused by the Imperial flagship firing its main weapon.”

“The same ship that single handedly destroyed half of Admiral Dachshund’s fleet?” One of them stopped him to ask.

“I believe so, Sir, but the damage done to the entrance was not as severe as what we encountered in orbit, and I... believe I know why that is.” Fox replied, which prompted another question.

“Inside the Force Point Temple were these objects called, uh...” He had to stop to recall their name. “Kinetic Cells.”

“These cells were some kind of ancient battery created by the Krazoa, and Andross somehow found out they existed. That’s more than likely why the Empire came to Sauria in the first place, and once they were in the Temple, they located several of them. If the Empire had managed to smuggle some of them out of the Temple before I blew it up, then that might explain why their flagship was so much more powerful once in orbit.”

“And how did you come to find this information?” One of the men asked.

He thought of Krystal, and her mind reading powers, the artificial intelligence she was speaking with... Fox couldn’t help but to pause.

“The teenage girl I rescued from the Force Point Temple told me all of this. When she’d been first captured, they took her into the Temple for interrogation, but their scientists tripped an alarm and the whole Temple went into lockdown. That’s what caused the energy field to appear around the planet. While the girl was trapped inside with the Imperials she overheard all of their communications. She was in the same room with their Admiral.” He told them the truth while omitting more than a handful of things that he didn’t want to have to explain. How would they react to being told there was an advanced AI in the Temple along with a girl trapped naked in a blue floating rock? What would they do to her if they found out she could read people’s minds?

“When we recovered your Arwing our report states that the two of you were both injured, and that she was found wearing only your jacket.” General Pepper pointed out, then looked down at the table to pick up a metallic tablet before turning its screen on. There was a data readout on the tablet that the General skimmed through before continuing.

“The medical report doesn’t indicate that the girl had been...” The dog paused like he was uncomfortable. “Her medical report says she suffered a concussion, three broken ribs, numerous other mild injuries. Evidence of... brain swelling. But her rape kit was negative. Do you know if she had been harmed in any other way?”

Fox felt uncomfortable. She hadn’t told him anything like that had happened, and as far as he knew she’d been inside the floating crystal the whole time. He honestly couldn’t say, but he’d just told them he’d found her there in a room full of Imperial goons!

"I honestly don't know. She only told me her ribs were broken when I grabbed her."

"How did you get inside the Temple and escape with her if it was locked down?" One of them asked, and Fox felt like his net of lies was beginning to entrap him all because he wanted to protect the girl. Krystal had been the one to unlock everything, as well as being the one who triggered the self-destruct. He had to think quick, and just commit to his lies.

"The Empire was using something to trick the Temple into thinking they were allies. I assume that's how they gained entry in the first place. When they screwed up and triggered the lock down, they had to find a new way to trick the Temple's computer. From what she told me they managed to find a way to forge security clearances and started reopening the Temple door by door. The girl had stolen a radio and was communicating with me whenever she had the chance."

"I had already snuck my way towards the Temple door and when there was an opening in their patrols and... just had to make a run for it, Sir. It was risky, but the girl was telling me that they'd found those batteries, and that they were excited about it. It's when I learned that it was something Andross wanted from Sauria. Once inside I had to avoid detection and eventually found my way to where she was."

"And General, I can't explain what happened to cause the self-destruct, but while I was inside the Temple the lights all turned red and a foreign language started playing a message on repeat. I can't repeat to you what it said, but with the red lights it felt like something bad. Using the confusion caused by the lights and alien message, I shot my way into the room, grabbed the girl and carried her back out with my Arwing flying to meet us on autopilot."

"So, you had no idea it was going to explode? What about the batteries?" He was asked.

Fox shrugged. The longer this debriefing lasted the more uncomfortable he became.

"I had no way to confirm anything. It was instinct, that something bad was going to happen and I didn't want to be around for it. I assume the Imperials must have felt the same way, since after I took off in my Arwing their ships all began to launch. The explosion happened as I was already gaining altitude with the girl."

"Our reconnaissance of the Temple site is... frightening, McCloud." One of the brass spoke up, the terrier looking at his own tablet.

"Have you seen it?" The same man asked.

"No, Sir. I have not seen the report, or the Temple site since leaving it."

General Pepper gestured to an aide who began to press buttons on the table's control panel. The hologram overhead began to shift into an overhead view of what Fox thought was the Saurian jungle, but there was a massive gaping hole right in the middle of it.

"This chasm is ten miles in diameter and more than twenty deep. Not only do we not know how this was done, but there is not one thing in our arsenal that could replicate a similar result. Do you have any idea how this may have been done?" He was asked.

He looked grimly at the hologram, knowing full well it was the Krazoa technology that was responsible. He shook his head.

"The Krazoa are thousands of years more advanced than us, Sir. Might as well be magic." He replied.

The brass shook his head and sat his tablet down.

"Fox, I'd like you to compile a detailed report of everything that happened down there and submit it to us for review. We'll be dissecting this disaster for months trying to figure it all out." General Pepper asked him, and Fox immediately agreed to it. If all he had to do was write it down, then that'd be easy. He just had to remember all his lies and not contradict himself.

The General then started asking the same aide from before to change the hologram to the 'Fleet'. The hologram shifted on command to show what looked like a couple hundred ships floating in orbit around Sauria.

"After the arrival of the 2nd Fleet I commanded the 1st, 3rd, and 4th to join it. I've already dispatched small detachments to begin searching local space for any signs of Imperial activity, and we're in the middle stages of assembling a plan for a task force. Battle records show there were 81 ships in the Imperial fleet, and far too many of them are presently unaccounted for. We can't determine how many were destroyed when their flagship blew up, Fox. We have no idea how many of them escaped Sauria." The General confessed.

"My guess would be worse than yours, Sir." Fox admitted. He'd have no idea.

"I would like the Star Fox Team to be a part of the new task force, once created, and to assist us in tracking down every last one of those scoundrels. Is this something you can do for us, Fox?" General Pepper asked.

Fox turned and acknowledged his two wingmen. Both of them looked at him and nodded, the pair setting their jawlines and signaling with their body language that they were game for anything. It was all up to Fox to decide. He turned back to the General and nodded to him, and to the other members of Corneria's top brass.

"Of course, General. It'll be just like old times." He replied.

“Glad to hear it, Fox. Dismissed.”

Fox snapped a salute, and turned to leave, but stopped himself before reaching the door.

“General?” He asked, the old dog turning his attention back to him and nodding.

“Has the girl been questioned yet?”

“No, we’ve been waiting for her condition to improve. Once she’s cleared, we’ll send a team to question her.”

“With your permission I would like to question her myself while I compile my own report. I think she’ll be more comfortable talking with someone she knows, especially with everything she’s been through.” Fox told the other man. The General looked thoughtful for a moment, then looked towards one of the other men, one of the brass, who then answered.

“Certainly, it can be arranged.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Fox nodded, raising his hand in a casual salute before turning back towards the door to make his exit, feeling relieved that he had a way to cover for his lies now that he could get to Krystal before some Intelligence officer did.

Meanwhile, as Krystal laid in her bed, she listened to the steady stream of noise around her. With her ears she tried to focus on the work the nurses were doing, their conversations, the sound of equipment being moved, the rhythmic noise of footsteps. Krystal had hoped that if she paid close enough attention to the physical world around her then she might be able to drown out the noise of everyone’s thoughts.

She failed.

The background noise of so many people was omnipresent in her head, and there was nothing she could do to silence it. Her headaches had subsided with the help of her new medications, but she could still hear everything around her, and what she couldn’t hear she still felt.

The orchestra of voices ebbed and flowed like water in waves, but the energy driving it was always the same. She didn’t need to hear each individual voice to understand the emotion that rested in that person’s soul. There was so much fear, anger, and dread. She had to endure the suffering of those injured in their beds around her, and the feelings of those tending to their wounds, and the many soldiers all anxiously waiting for what would come next.

'The war was supposed to be over!' she'd heard spoken by so many voices as the men and women around her all recoiled from what had happened at Sauria.

And her ribs still hurt. She felt so pitiful lying there, her depression reaching new depths by the thoughts of so many wounded and hurting souls around her.

Somewhere in the distance she could feel traces of Mr.-, no, Fox. He wanted her to stop calling him Mr. McCloud. Fox was somewhere on the ship still, but she couldn't single out his voice. It was his presence that she felt instead. She'd been so close to him in his Arwing, sharing that terrifying experience, that she felt like she'd learned more than just the sound of his inner voice, but something more than that. It was so strange being able to feel someone's presence at a distance. She was reminded of her own mother, teasing her father time and again about how a woman's intuition was always right.

Krystal knew there was no such thing as women's intuition, or a man's gut instinct, and yet here she was lying in bed feeling the impossible. She knew where Fox McCloud was like a compass had been installed inside her brain. Krystal did not know what the Voice did to her in the Stronghold. It said it had made her 'compatible', but what did that really mean? If she could hear people's thoughts, and know where they were even if they were far away, what other powers might she have?

What even were the Krazoa if this was the power they could wield? Was it natural, or did they change themselves to become like this through the power of their technology? She was reminded of the Psionic Purge... of their terrifying weapons. Whatever they were, she hated them now! They'd brought so much pain to Sauria, and now to all of Lylat.

Familiar voices were in the distance but approaching. As they grew closer the voices came into focus and she recognized them as her parents. They were being brought down the hall by a nurse. Her father was angry, accusatory, demanding to know why they'd been prevented from seeing their daughter sooner.

She couldn't even hear them with her ears yet and she already knew they were making a scene on her behalf, and she felt embarrassed. When they finally stepped into ear shot, she wanted to cry. To her, the separation from the parents didn't feel like a few hours or even a few days, it felt like years! She finally got to hear their voices and she knew they were ok!

They stepped through the curtain, and both her parents rushed to her side, her mother breaking down into tears alongside her as their family was reunited.

"Oh, my baby!" Her mother sobbed, her father taking the care to cradle her mother into his side while his own eyes bore the look of sleepless nights, but he was trying to keep himself strong for both his girls. She could hear the rapid emotions in their hearts, the words they spoke, and the words they kept inside.

“Mom! Dad!” Krystal started to cry, reaching out to them as they took her hands, but stopped when she winced. Her ribs were acting up and her mother rushed around to the other side of the bed to take her hand, so she didn’t have to twist in her bed.

“We’re so glad you’re safe, honey. We were so worried!” He told her, and she squeezed his hand as hard as she could, which wasn’t by very much.

“I’m so glad you’re both safe.” She told her parents, but her mother shook her head fiercely and insisted in her thoughts that it was her daughter that had been in the most danger.

“We were fine, baby. It was you we were worried about.” Both of them were lying, hiding what they had gone through in the cold caves of Sauria, and ignoring the abuse they’d suffered at the hands of the Empire. They were hiding all of it behind their love for her, and Krystal started crying harder. Now she knew how much her parents held from her every day, as they put her before themselves.

“We’re here honey, it’s going to be alright.” Her father soothed her, taking her hand in both of his and patting the back of her hand gently.

There were two nurses outside their cubicle talking low, but Krystal could hear in their heads that they were frustrated by the ‘two civvies’ barging into their infirmary. They weren’t cruel, but their thoughts were consumed with all the work they had to do, the injured patients that all needed care and rest. One nurse was repeating in his head Krystal’s list of injuries and how she needed to rest and recover as much as possible.

Krystal was mad at, but also understanding, of the nurse’s position. She did need rest, much more than she probably realized, but she wanted to see her parents more.

“No one would tell us what had happened to you until we started threatening to throw fists!” Her father said, his anger sharply rising as he recalled in his thoughts how much effort it took to get answers from the soldiers keeping watch of them and their colleagues in a hangar bay. She saw images in her mind, pulled from her father’s head, of makeshift housing and cubicles erected out of tents in a large metal room filled with military equipment. How could she see all of this without ever having been there?

“They finally let us come see you.” Her mother added and leaned her head down to hold Krystal’s hand to her cheek as she quietly wept. Her mother was reaching her emotional limit and was trying to calm herself down. Her father; however, was strong enough to keep talking to her.

“When we were told they found you with Fox McCloud we were so relieved, honey. We... we didn’t know if he could rescue you, but he did!” He told her, smiling even as she could feel his fear buried behind his smile. She could see fragments of a conversation her father had with Fox.

An exchange of words and a promise to save her. Fox had been looking for her well before he reached the Stronghold...

"He was here earlier." She told him. "But he had to leave to talk to the General."

"I would have liked to meet him again, to thank him." He replied.

Her mother wasn't speaking, still cradling her hand in hers, but she was thinking of what her father had just said. Both her parents were so grateful to Fox for what he'd done. Krystal would have to make sure they got to see him again so they could express their gratitude.

Gratitude.

There was an undercurrent of that feeling coursing through the whole ship, but much of it was hard to follow, being drowned out by the fear and dread. The flow of that emotion coursed around the ship, and Krystal could feel a part of it being drawn towards Fox and his companions, but there were other currents as well. There were many people on this ship who hadn't fought in the battle, and they were all concerned, but from them she could feel that they were also grateful to the wounded men and women sharing the infirmary with her.

When she was a little girl, she remembered feeling something like this. After Andross' army had attacked Corneria she'd seen the fear, felt it herself. It was terrible, but there the Cornerian military stood in the aftermath, picking up the pieces, launching off into battle to pursue their attackers. The Star Fox Team had been there, had been the ones to deal the fatal blow that drove the enemy back to the stars.

His face looked younger then, but she could still remember him on the tv. He and his companions looked so confident and brave, and they'd just pushed back the Empire! She felt hope then, and her parents would have felt it, too, and her neighbors. Everyone on Corneria would have felt it!

This ship filled with suffering needed that same hope now, and she wanted to believe Fox could do it again. She squeezed her mother's hand gently.

She was terrified of the Krazoa, but their technology had given her an incredible gift. It let her help Fox both on Sauria and in space. The voice, Central Command, probably never intended for her to use this power for anything other than protecting its master's technology, but now it was gone, lost in a hole that reached deep underground. She didn't know how she knew that, but she knew it was true. The Stronghold, the Graveyard, the dig sites they'd all spent months studying. They were all gone.

But maybe she could help to bring hope back, and not just to this ship but to everyone. News would get out; people would learn the Empire wasn't dead. They'd be frightened! She bit her lip,

and her father leaned towards her to run his hand across her cheek, not knowing why she looked so filled with sorrow. She knew she could help!

She needed to speak to Fox again. She needed to ask him if he would let her help him again, to bring back hope like he had on Corneria so many years ago. Krystal looked to her father and squeezed his hand, holding both of her parents as tight as her weak body would allow. They wouldn't be happy with her decision, but there was no other decision to be made. Krystal needed to join his team if she was to have any way of helping.

The Chief Medical Officer hadn't been happy that General Pepper had called one of his patients out of Medical and to the bridge. Fox felt fine apart from his lingering headache, but for now the doctor was his boss and if the boss wanted to run another round of tests on him before clearing him for duty, then Fox guessed that's what he had to do. Just like old times.

The infirmary hadn't changed much since he'd left, and Peppy was still sound asleep in his bed. The attending nurse had told him that he'd regained consciousness briefly but wasn't well enough to do more than fall back asleep. Between his injuries and exhaustion, he'd be in this state for at least another day, day and a half, but even after that he'd still be under strict doctor's orders.

The examinations they put Fox through gave him time to stew in his own thoughts. With the General now enlisting the Star Fox Team for his new taskforce he knew he could at least keep the bills paid for a while longer. He wore a wry smile that confused his nurse a bit, but he needed to think of something positive to offset all the bad. With Peppy so badly hurt... they were stuck as a three-man team for now.

What was left of the 5th fleet was so tattered that the General had ordered the unit to be mothballed to the history books. Instead of reforming the 5th they would just reorganize it into the beginnings of Pepper's new Anti-Imperial Task Force. No more relying on small recon teams to prowl the depths of space. He had every intention of building a migratory force that could explore every inch of Lylat that would have enough firepower to bring hell down on the Empire once they found them.

The Star Fox Team would be a part of this new unit as a special vanguard, and with The Great Fox's superior maneuverability he could travel where the new AITF fleet couldn't easily reach. His team would become the tip of the General's spear.

"Apart from your minor injuries you appear to be healthy, Mr. McCloud. Please continue to take the rest of your prescribed medication, and you're cleared for duty." The Chief Medical Officer told him after reviewing his exam results.

“Thank you, Doc.” He replied and hopped off the bed to begin changing back into his uniform. He wondered where his jacket went off to, then remembered it would have been with the girl. Krystal was her name. He’d really only known her for such a short amount of time.

He made his way from his cubicle and back to Peppy, checking in on the old man to find him still quietly snoozing. Fox decided he was in good enough hands to be left alone, then left the rabbit behind as he tracked down Krystal’s cubicle. When he arrived, she was alone, and looking like she’d been crying, her eyes red from shed tears.

“How you doing?” He asked her, stepping inside.

“I had a fight with my parents.” She replied, and he couldn’t stop himself some smiling. Teenagers. At least she got to see them safe and sound.

Before he could reach her bed, she lifted a hand and pointed at the corner of the cubicle. He glanced over and saw a small stool with a piece of clothing folded neatly atop it. He smiled again, thanked her, and went to retrieve his jacket from the stool. It felt good to wear it again.

“It looks good on you.” She told him.

“Thanks.”

What was your fight about, he thought to himself, adjusting to the knowledge that she could hear anything he had running in his head. Seeing her parents again should have been a happy occasion.

“It wasn’t all bad. I told them I wanted to volunteer.” She answered.

He inhaled, knowing what that meant. After these terrible losses the Cornerian military was about to go into overdrive in an effort to find new recruits. In this day and age there was no conscription or draft so they had to convince people to sign up of their own free will. That was easier to do when there was a frightening enemy standing on your doorstep, and the looming specter of the Empire was rather frightening indeed. There’d be a lot of young hot shots signing up in the coming months.

“You’re right.” She replied.

Krystal opened her eyes again and looked at him like she wanted to say more.

“You know what that means, right?” He said out loud.

“You’re going to have to be on a ship like this every day. Surrounded by all of this.” He continued, lifting his hand as he spoke to spin a finger around in a circle to signify the horde of people crammed into a starship.

He then purposely thought of everyone who had died. Every single starship in the Cornerian Armada could become a steel coffin for those on them. Volunteering for the military was dangerous even in peacetime. There were always mercenary gangs, criminal thugs, smugglers, traffickers. Even without the Empire around there were still problems the military had to deal with.

The girl nodded.

“I know.” Her voice cracked. “I know it.”

Do you?

She nodded.

“I want to help. There’s something I can do that no one else can.” She replied.

“Have you told anyone?” He asked.

She shook her head. Good, he thought. He didn’t know how that would go over with the military if they found out they had a real psychic lying right beneath their noses. What would a girl like her end up doing in the military, he wondered to himself without caring if she ‘overheard’ him thinking. Most jobs in the military weren’t illustrious or pretty. Even battleships had janitors.

“I can learn how to be a pilot. I can remember how you flew your ship.” She started, looking at him intensely like she needed his approval. “You didn’t think words when you were flying your Arwing, but I could still feel it. The buttons you pressed and why, the flight stick directions.”

Overhearing it in my head isn’t the same as flying a real space fighter.

“I know, but I can learn. I want to learn!” She told him fiercely now. He could tell she meant it.

“I believe you.” He replied, and he meant it as much as she did. Her voice was weak, but the conviction was still there. She smiled, but looked afraid, too.

“I can put in a good word for you. I’m an alumnus of the Cornerian Flight Academy after all.” He told her with a smile of his own and put his hands on the rails of the bed. She reached out to him and put her palm over his hand and squeezed.

“Can I join your Team?” She asked, and he stopped in his tracks both physical and otherwise.

“You know what I can do, and you know I’m willing to learn. You can put in a good word for me.” She smiled, her eyes watering up as his thoughts bounced around with many different ways of telling her no.

There were all kinds of reasons to refuse her, the dangers, the additional supplies they'd need for a 5th person, the extensive training she'd need. He watched her intently as he rattled off his reasons to himself, locked inside his own head for the moment while the girl clung to his hand desperately, her eyes beginning to water up until she had to shut them to stop herself from shedding a tear.

"You're asking a lot." He said out loud.

"I know." She replied weakly. The conviction was still there, but she sounded so afraid. He could shut her down right now, and just put in a good word to Bill. He probably still had connections at the Academy and could pull strings. The girl sure was a lot of trouble, he thought more to himself than to her.

She gasped, revealing she'd been holding her breath. As her tears began to flow, she was smiling. She knew he'd made up his mind the moment he'd done it.

"Are you even old enough to drive?" He asked.

She nodded happily.

"I'm 18."

He sighed and reached up to rub the spot between his eyes again. You better listen good, and take everything you're taught to heart, or you're out. To the Academy you'll go.

"I promise!" She told him. He looked at her again and reached his free hand over to hers and gave it a gentle pat.

"Rest up, 'recruit'. Once you're cleared for duty I can give you a tour of your new home." He told her, thinking of The Great Fox. He didn't need to read a girl's mind to know how happy she was.

Guess the Team was now back up to four.

A few days later an assembly was called for by General Pepper, and he wanted everyone from the 5th Fleet to be in attendance along with the civilians that were on Sauria. Krystal was there along with the rest of the Star Fox Team, having recovered enough to attend so long as she favored her ribs. The eldest member of the Team, Peppy Hare, was there, too, but with his condition he was given a wheelchair to use during the ceremony. She could feel his pained thoughts, both physical and emotional.

The Ferratus' hangar bay where they'd been gathered had been completely emptied out to serve as a makeshift auditorium. The only evidence that it had once been a hangar were the squadron of space fighters hanging in their gantries suspended overhead. Beneath them now stood the hundreds of surviving servicemen and women of the 5th Fleet. Many were still recovering from their injuries, but they wore their bandaged wounds with pride as they remained stiff at attention while General Pepper and the other gathered officials moved slowly through the gathered assembly.

Each came to a stop before every serviceman and pinned a medal of honor to their chest and thanked them for their service. It was a solemn and lengthy affair as there were many medals to give, and some people received more than others for their acts of heroism.

A stage had been hastily erected in front of the gathered crowd, and at its base was an arrangement of framed crew manifests. There was one for each ship in the 5th fleet, and they all contained a list of those who had died. Krystal didn't have a chance to read them, but she could hear everyone's thoughts, and heard so many names be spoken in people's hearts. It took so much effort for her to keep herself together as she was crushed by the weight of so much grief and anger being gathered in one place.

She wasn't standing with the civilians who'd been gathered. Her parents and colleagues, as well as Fox and his Team, had been instructed to stand in the front row right in front of the stage. They had been the starting point of the 'Saurian Incident', its ground zero. So, it had been decided that they would be put front and center.

Her clothes did not fit well, since they were not tailored for a girl. Fox had gifted her one of his own spare uniforms, since they were apparently the same height. He'd seemed so much taller before, but then again, she only got her first chance to stand next to him the day before. He'd given her a jacket and a jumpsuit, which only barely fit her feminine frame due to her mother's help and a handful of sewing needles. The jacket hung awkwardly off her narrow shoulders, and the jumpsuit hugged too tightly to her hips. The boots she'd been given were loose and ill fitted, nor was there a spare scarf for her to wear like the others did. Standing next to them all without a complete uniform left her feeling almost naked.

Fox promised he would get a uniform commissioned for her soon, but for now she could only thank him earnestly for letting her have this much. She was proud of the hand-me-down and incomplete uniform she wore. It meant something special to her, something far greater than herself.

Her parents had been... upset with her choosing this path, and she knew it far better than their words could express. She could feel it in their hearts, the dread and fear they felt the instant they saw her wearing the uniform. Her mother was terrified for her, and her father was a mix of pride and disappointment. He didn't know how to feel about his daughter leaving him, abandoning their life's work to join something new.

It was difficult for her to stand so still and at attention. None of the civilians bothered. They stood as still as they could, of course, but they weren't military. They all wobbled and adjusted their stances, scratching itches without looking too disrespectful. Her new Team were at attention perfectly, even the short frog she'd been introduced to. Of the four original members of the Team Slippy seemed to be the one who fit the least in the group.

But they were all acting as professionals today, even Peppy who was still in his chair, eyes forward as he waited for the 'brass' to come to them. She didn't really understand why they were called 'the brass' until it was finally her turn.

A middle-aged man in a tailored dress uniform stood before her, and he had a young assistant following behind him with a wooden box in his hands. He turned to his assistant and removed a silver and opal medal from the box before turning to pin it on her jacket just above her left breast.

"The highest honor we can bestow upon a civilian. Thank you for your courage, young lady." He told her as he finished pinning the medal. She knew this man was aware of who she was, he was a very important man. The medal she'd just been given was a Proof of Civilian Valor. She'd never heard of that one before. The man nodded to her before stepping aside to stand before Fox.

He received two medals, and by listening to their thoughts she knew what those medals were for. One was a Medal of Honor, for his acts of heroism, and the other a purple heart, for having been wounded in battle. She wondered why she didn't get one of those. Slippy and Falco were next, and each received a medal of honor, but not a purple one. The last in line was Peppy who received the same two medals as Fox.

The old rabbit's thoughts were eerily quiet. What she did get from him were thoughts of his aches and pains, and an empty feeling of dread. The others were more animated in their thoughts. Falco was restless and wanting to leave, his thoughts drifting to any number of other activities he'd rather be doing, whereas Slippy was more concerned with their Arwings and The Great Fox. All of them needed repairs.

Fox was dwelling hard on logistics she didn't understand. Repairs to the ships, their finances, travel preparations, coordinating with the rest of the AITF, and then again in the background was the feeling of empty dread coming from the old rabbit. He feared something, she knew it, but he refused to say its name even in his thoughts. Sometimes he thought of her, and how much of a challenge it would be to train her as a pilot, but that's where his thoughts ended.

An hour later and the brass had finished awarding everyone their medals. The officials all took the stage and stood behind General Pepper who approached a steel podium with a microphone. There were other servicemen standing below the stage with film equipment and cameras. As he began to speak, she could hear his voice along with his thoughts, knowing what he would say before his mouth could even form the words.

“To all sailors and pilots gathered here today of the 5th Cornerian Fleet of Katina, we mourn the passing of our countryman who died gallantly in the heat of battle. Our enemy, resurrected now after eight years of peace, have dealt a vicious blow to our steel, but not to our resolve. In honor of those departed, and in defense of those who hope for a future filled with peace, I am deactivating the 5th Fleet and reassembling it under a new title. The history of the 5th will be forever remembered, and all you gathered here today will be given a renewed purpose, a great crusade towards which we have unknowingly striven these past many years.”

“Your service and sacrifice over the last 36 hours will not be forgotten!”

“I, General Pepper, acting Commander in Chief of the Cornerian Army and Defense Forces, hereby activate the Anti-Imperial Task Force. It will be your mission to hunt down every trace of the Empire that remains in the Lylat System, and to bring them to justice! New warships will be commissioned for this cause, and veteran sailors and pilots will be recruited from all across Lylat to bolster your numbers to rival that of any adversary. There will be no greater force of military might than the AITF.”

He paused and took a silent breath before looking down at Fox, and then to the rest of Team with his eyes stopping last at her. He questioned her presence, his thoughts filled with doubt, which made her fur want to bristle. She wouldn't let another's doubt stop her from doing what she must!

“I also extend thanks to the Star Fox Team who was our first response to this new threat which we face. Our victory over the Empire could not have happened were it not for their bravery. You aided us once eight years ago, and I am proud to have you by our side once again as part of the AITF.”

“To all of you! I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty, and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full victory. Good luck.”

“Dismissed.” He finished, snapping his hand up in salute, nodding to those gathered before taking a step back from the podium and pivoting on a heel to leave the stage. The officials all followed him down the steps while the camera crews snapped photos of what would surely be remembered as a historic moment.

Throughout the hangar the servicemen were given orders by their superiors to exit the hangar bay, and depending on if they were injured or not, they were being given new duties or getting sent back to the infirmary to finish their recovery.

She turned to Fox, looked at the medals on his chest and then down at her own. She questioned herself if she truly earned the pretty piece of metal she'd been given, recalling those she'd killed in the Stronghold with a power she couldn't understand. Was this the price one paid

for heroism? Krystal looked back to Fox and wondered how large a price he had paid, and Falco, too. Slippy, and then Peppy. What had it cost them?

“Well, now that this is done can we go back to the ship? I got work to do!” Falco whined, stretching his back and legs from having stood still for so long.

“You’re both cleared for duty. Have they released supplies for the repairs yet, Slippy?” Fox asked, turning towards the other team members for now.

“Yeah, they got me most of everything I need, but to fix the g-diffusers I had to put in a request from Space Dynamics to send us more parts. I have enough to fix both Arwings, but then I’m tapped out. If they break again, we’re toast!” The frog replied.

“What about the new Arwings?” Fox asked, Krystal knowing that they weren’t new Arwings for her, but a replacement for the ones that were lost in the fighting. Peppy’s had been completely destroyed, and Fox’s had been so heavily damaged that they’d scrapped it for spare parts.

“They’re coming, but it’ll be a few months. Dad’s trying to fast track them for us.” He replied, the two men discussing one thing verbally while the frog was flipping through a densely packed rolodex in his mind as he mentally reviewed everything he’d need to fix two Arwings and to prep two more for active duty once they arrived from Space Dynamics.

A nurse approached them, wanting to take Peppy back to his room in the infirmary, but she could feel a sense of terrible dread coming from the rabbit the closer the nurse got to his wheelchair.

The old man’s thoughts turned back to her, the training she’d need to do, everything she would have to learn if she wanted to pilot an Arwing. It was almost like he was reliving memories. He was thinking of a much younger Fox sitting in a flight simulator. There were tears in the young man’s eyes. She saw the rabbit reaching out to Fox, his fur was less grey, and his hands were far stronger. He put his hand over Fox’s shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly.

She felt a lump in her throat, but she didn’t know why. Why was Peppy thinking about Fox’s father? Where was this feeling of terrible loss coming from?

Before he could be wheeled away, he put his hand up to stop the nurse.

“Krystal.” He said, looking at her.

A terrible weight began to settle over her shoulders as he made to stand, his legs shaking under his weight as his hands pushed against the arms of the wheelchair. The nurse tried to stop him, but he angrily refused any attempt to be seated back in his chair.

“Peppy.” Fox approached him concerned, but a look from the old man stopped him, and Fox stepped back, his thoughts confused, but he wasn’t willing to challenge his elder. She felt respect coming from Fox, she knew he thought highly of Peppy, so much so that it had fooled her into thinking that the man had been his father.

The old man stood, his gaze returned to her, freezing her in place as he forced himself upright. The pain in his body became her pain, the ache in his head becoming her own, as he took the few steps required to stand in front of her. The weight grew more terrible as she felt her eyes begin to tear up as the thing the man feared most became a reality.

He lifted his hands to his neck and began to untie his scarf, its red fabric weathered pink with age for its many years of use. It was the same scarf he’d worn alongside James McCloud, a name she’d never heard of before, but she knew it now. As he unwound it from his neck, she could feel something die inside him. When the scarf left his neck, it took a piece of him with it. He reached out to her and wrapped it around her neck and began to tie it tight.

“Welcome to the Star Fox Team.” He told her.

I will never fly again, he thought, and she began to cry.

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