



Zoids Fan Anthology

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Cover: Hayate Liger by Kayla Barko

One Life Lived: Melanie and the Hellrunner

Two souls, separated by incalculable distance, linked by the shared loss and pain of identical lives.

The Hellrunner could not remember a time when it had not been piloted by Mitchum. Mitchum was a courier, and he and the Hellrunner spent their days carrying messages and important packages from town to town, across planet Zi. It was a life of freedom and quiet camaraderie, free from the bustle and speed limits of the cities. Every night, Mitchum would sleep under the stars while the Hellrunner stood guard and contemplated the vast majesty of the heavens laid out above them.

Every night, Melanie would fall asleep knowing that her father was nearby, whether sitting on her bed and telling her a story, or talking with fellow adventurers in an adjoining room. She loved travelling the world with her father, exploring the chaotic cities and lush jungles of Asia, the sprawling plains and sun-baked townships of Africa, and the rugged peaks and lively barrios of South America. The life of a professional adventurer's daughter was glorious!

The glorious life came crashing down on that fateful day Mitchum agreed to deliver a small package to Fifth Harvest, a rural village at the edge of the Lowlands desert. Mitchum and the Hellrunner arrived in the late afternoon, and entered the tiny hamlet at the mandated speed. Traversing the wide, potholed main street, they came to the local tavern - La Maison de la Victoire - and Mitchum swung easily down from the Hellrunner's cockpit. Without a second thought, he sauntered across the tavern's threshold to seek out the recipient of the innocuous package.

Melanie had been sitting patiently on the seat outside the bar for what felt like several hours now, and her father had still not returned – even though he had promised not to be long. Her box of raisins was empty, the sun had disappeared behind a building, and she was starting to really need the toilet. Her father had told her that she wasn't allowed to come in to the bar, so she started thinking about where else she could go to relieve herself. Perhaps, she thought, she could run around the corner to the public bathroom she'd seen earlier, pop in for a moment, and be back before anybody knew. It was such a short distance, there was no way she could get lost.

The Hellrunner was lost. It had waited two days for Mitchum to emerge from the tavern, and the lingering inactivity had drawn Scavengers. Antennae twitching, the lumbering isopods had converged upon the Hellrunner, making clear their intention to strip it down, consume its core and sell the remainder for parts. The Hellrunner was left with no option but to flee, planning to rely on its superior speed to outdistance the Scavengers, then double back to Fifth Harvest to rendezvous with Mitchum. But after many hours of false turns and missed landmarks in the shifting sands of the great desert, night was falling quickly, and the Hellrunner no longer knew how to get back to the village and to Mitchum.

Unable to find her way back to any person or place she knew, Melanie stole to survive. As the weeks drew on, she quickly became an adept shoplifter, and fell into and out of loose alliances with other children living on the street. When pickings were good, allies were plentiful and reliable, and Melanie never went hungry. When security forces roamed the bazaar and cracked down on crime, the street kids defaulted to self-preservation, scattering at the first sign of trouble and hoarding whatever meagre plunder they could lift from stalls and homes. Desperation and necessity moulded Melanie, transforming her into a wild and wary creature, always watching for an opportunity to cement her survival.

After months of dwelling only in the dangers and constant struggle of the now, she stopped thinking of her future. With memories fading by the day, she stopped looking for her father.

A flicker of movement in its periphery jolted the Hellrunner from its task. Letting the rusted carrion fall back to the ground, it turned to face the new arrivals – a small band of Trooperzoids and Zarwolves, travelling with a single Iron Kong. The Hellrunner readied itself to flee, but the newcomers seemed uninterested in it, content to simply dig through the sand in search of anything to salvage or consume. Straining its visual receptors, the Hellrunner zoomed in on the zoids and saw that each was piloted by a human. After so long living wild and rough, the Hellrunner had almost forgotten about human pilots, and the reminder brought back vivid recollections of Mitchum.

His name was Danel, and Melanie instantly fell under his spell. He was clean, far cleaner than any of the other people who had spoken to her over the past months. The young people in his group looked well-fed, and Danel was quick to give food to the street kids like Melanie who needed it. Melanie grew accustomed to having him and his gang of misfits nearby, and eventually found their presence to be a comfort. One blustery morning, Danel sent one of his lieutenants over to Melanie, to ask her to join an operation he was planning. She was led to the derelict building that Danel was using as a headquarters, and ushered in. It was strange. The room didn't look like a room that was being used to plan a heist. Something was not right there.

Something was wrong there! Too late, the Hellrunner tried to flee – but the Iron Kong's fist slammed the smaller zoid's neck against the ground. The Hellrunner tried to kick free, but two of the Zarwolves grabbed its legs in their powerful jaws, biting deep. As the Hellrunner thrashed ineffectually, humans swarmed from the other zoids, up and over it.

Several forced pry bars under the lip of its cockpit, straining and buckling the metal as the Hellrunner fought to keep the cockpit closed – then forcing the hatch open and clambering inside. Whooping bestially, the humans tore the cover from the Hellrunner’s console, and one of them jammed a data cable into one of the exposed access ports. A wave of command codes punched into the zoid’s core systems, battering its defences. The Hellrunner fought back against the assault on its very self, but with little success. One after the other, each human forced his command codes into the navigation system, compelling the Hellrunner to accept him as a pilot. Eventually, mercifully, the Hellrunner’s core was overwhelmed by the brutal assault, and it fell dormant.

Melanie awoke shivering, her battered and broken body aching at the slightest movement. She didn’t know where she was, and could only make out blurry shadows through her swollen eyes, but she could hear voices. She called out for help, and the voices stopped momentarily - then resumed, laughing. A door swung open and flooded the room with harsh light, framing an imposing figure in the doorway. The silhouette was joined by two others, then several more. Then the horror began anew.

The Hellrunner could no longer run. Its leg had been damaged in that first assault, so many months ago, and too many of the humans had piloted it while it should have been recovering. Every step was agony, and hydraulic fluid seeped intermittently from the long gashes opened by the Zarwolves’ fangs. The humans avoided using it when they could, opting to instead use the group’s undamaged zoids whenever possible, but there were never enough zoids to go around. Some unlucky human would usually wind up piloting the crippled Hellrunner, cursing at its clumsiness and wrenching the controls angrily to control it. Its systems clouded by the crudely written command overrides, the Hellrunner responded sluggishly, and often stood immobile for long periods, trying to piece together the fragments of what used

to be its mind. Connections sometimes seemed so close, almost able to bridge the screaming torrents of data from the overrides, but they would never settle into place before being swept away by ever-vigilant sentry protocols.

Caught unaware by the callous backhand, Melanie hit the wall hard before falling to the floor in a crumpled heap. Scrambling backwards, she cowered before Danel. She cried out for mercy, babbling that she hadn’t meant to drop his meal, that her weak ankle had rolled on the uneven floorboards, that it wasn’t her fault. Standing above her, he laughed. From a pocket, he took out his most effective weapon – the tool he used to control her and against which she could not imagine rebelling. He asked her if she wanted it, if she thought she deserved it, what she would do for it. Anything, she said. He laughed again, dropped the package into her pleading hands, then turned and left the room. He told the assembled group of henchmen that they were welcome to her, and Melanie hoped in vain that her dishevelled and disfigured body would hold no interest for any of them.

Days turned into months. Months turned into years.

With nowhere else to turn, Melanie withdrew from the world. She lost herself in the swirling confusion of her abused and narcotised mind.

Stumbling in a daze, the Hellrunner was piloted through the desert on yet another foray for the humans. Pickings had been lean of late, and the humans had been roving further and further afield in their hunt for salvage. It felt a ripple of excitement pass amongst the group, and realisation slowly surfaced through the murk of its addled core that the humans had found fresh prey. Lifting its head, to the great annoyance of the human pilot riding within, the Hellrunner looked out across the hazy vista. There was a lone Scorpozoid, nosing about in the desiccated remains of a long-dead Zolkon. Its cockpit hung ajar, half-filled with sand, and it was clear that

the zoid had been without pilot for some time.

Melanie watched as Danel and his soldiers stealthily fanned out around the courtyard. The young boy sifting through the pile of refuse saw the movement, but thought nothing of it – Danel’s men were now adept at appearing non-threatening. Melanie saw a rapid exchange of hand signals, and watched as Danel prepared himself to approach the boy. Suddenly, overwhelmed by visions and memories, Melanie felt an urgency she thought she had left long behind. She pushed against the walls of the sanctuary she had erected in her mind, the sanctuary that had become a prison. She screamed in silence as she saw Danel call out to the skittish boy, assuring him that everything was going to be okay, and threw herself against the walls with all her might. At the sight of Danel forming a subtle hand signal behind his back, out of view of the boy, she poured everything she had into forcing her way out.

Pushing through the sentry protocols infesting its command system, the Hellrunner threw open its cockpit and flung its head to the side, sending the tiny human pilot flying. Awkwardly, it lurched into a shambling gait, running towards the Scorpozoid. It flooded the airwaves with warnings, urging the other zoid to turn and run, to get away while it could. The humans reacted, charging their zoids towards the Scorpozoid, but it was too late – it was already skittering away across the sand, its many legs carrying it swiftly from danger. The Hellrunner ambled to a halt, well aware that it no longer had the speed to make its own escape. Resignedly, it turned back towards the other zoids, catching a momentary glimpse of the Iron Kong’s fist barreling towards it – then sailing sideways from the force of the punch.

Blows rained down upon Melanie, and she felt sharp pains deep within her. Her face slick with her own blood, she could barely see, and all she could do was pull herself into a ball. Heavy boots stamped and kicked her, and she could

feel her life ebbing away. She felt her consciousness retreat from the pain, lifting up and out of her body, opening to the universe. Far, far away, she felt something familiar, something she needed. She reached for it across immeasurable distance, through the endless void of time and space, and her awareness brushed against a kindred spirit, a carnival mirror’s reflection of her. Melanie felt its pain, and her heart broke. She touched the alien soul gently to alert it to her presence, and offered it the only thing she had to give.

“Take my strength. Take my speed. Take my passion and my anger. Take whatever you need.”

The Zarwolf howled with pain as the Hellrunner suddenly kicked free, tearing out the wolf’s teeth as it wrested its leg free of the powerful canine jaws. Whipping its tail around, the Hellrunner smashed through the cockpit glass of the nearest Trooperzoid, sending it reeling. It flexed its mangled leg, then extended it as, to the astonishment and confusion of its human captors, the metal shone, then liquefied and flowed together.

Melanie’s pulse slowed.

Torn hydraulic cables wound around the Hellrunner, knitting together and sinking back into its body.

Melanie’s lung collapsed.

The flowing metal slowed and solidified, settling into a flawless shell of newly-forged alloy.

Arteries throughout Melanie’s body burst as she channelled her life across the expanse. Starved of oxygen, her brain began to die.

Smoke poured from the Hellrunner’s core as it rejected the humans’ command overrides, boiling away the poison and freeing it from slavery. Its cockpit snapped shut, and electric

fire danced about the seams – forever sealing its consoles and controls from invaders. The Hellrunner turned to the Iron Kong and fixed it in its sights. The agitated human piloting the massive gorilla stared back for several long seconds, then with a cry of wrath and frustration spurred his zoid into action. The Kong’s missile pod swung down towards the Hellrunner, preparing a barrage to shake the foundations of Heaven. Before the missiles could fire, the Hellrunner tipped its head forward, revealing a gleaming new cannon on its back. The cannon roared, and a single shell burst forth, plunging straight into the larger zoid’s missile pod. The Hellrunner turned and ran, faster than any pursuer ever could, feeling a grim sense of satisfaction at the sound of the missile pod exploding and destroying its tormenter.

Once his soldiers had left the room, Danel crouched down over Melanie’s unconscious body. Gently, he brushed a slick lock of hair from her forehead then, lowering his mouth to Melanie’s ear, he taunted her. “You stupid, used-up slattern. Do you think you’ve changed anything? I will find that child and make him mine, and your worthless body will wash out to sea without a single person caring.”

Several panels on the Hellrunner’s console flickered to furious activity, then erupted in flame.

<< TAKE MY WEAPONS SYSTEM >>

Melanie’s hand snaked out to grab Danel’s throat. Effortlessly, she drew herself up to a sitting position and brought the flailing man to within a few inches of her face. She opened her eyes, and forced Danel to look deep within them. He saw the pain he had inflicted upon her, saw the damage his cruelty and selfishness had wrought. Melanie forced him to look deeper. Danel saw the girl whose soul he had come so close to destroying, saw what she could have been had he not stolen away her potential. Melanie’s eyes clasped Danel tightly and drew him all the way in. He gasped, seeing more power than he could ever have dreamed existed. It was

terrible, and beautiful, and too vast for a person to witness and survive. Danel died in that room.

Something did live on in his body, but it was not Danel. The new person would devote his life to charity and caring for others, campaigning endlessly against drug abuse and domestic violence, and give away every cent he earned. Every morning when the new person woke, his faced would be streamed with tears, haunted by dreams of what Danel had seen inside Melanie.

Her body too badly broken for even the Hellrunner’s power to sustain it any longer, Melanie slumped back to the floor. She closed her eyes for the last time, drew her last breath, and her heart beat its last.

...

...

<< JOIN ME. WE CAN SHARE THIS BODY >>

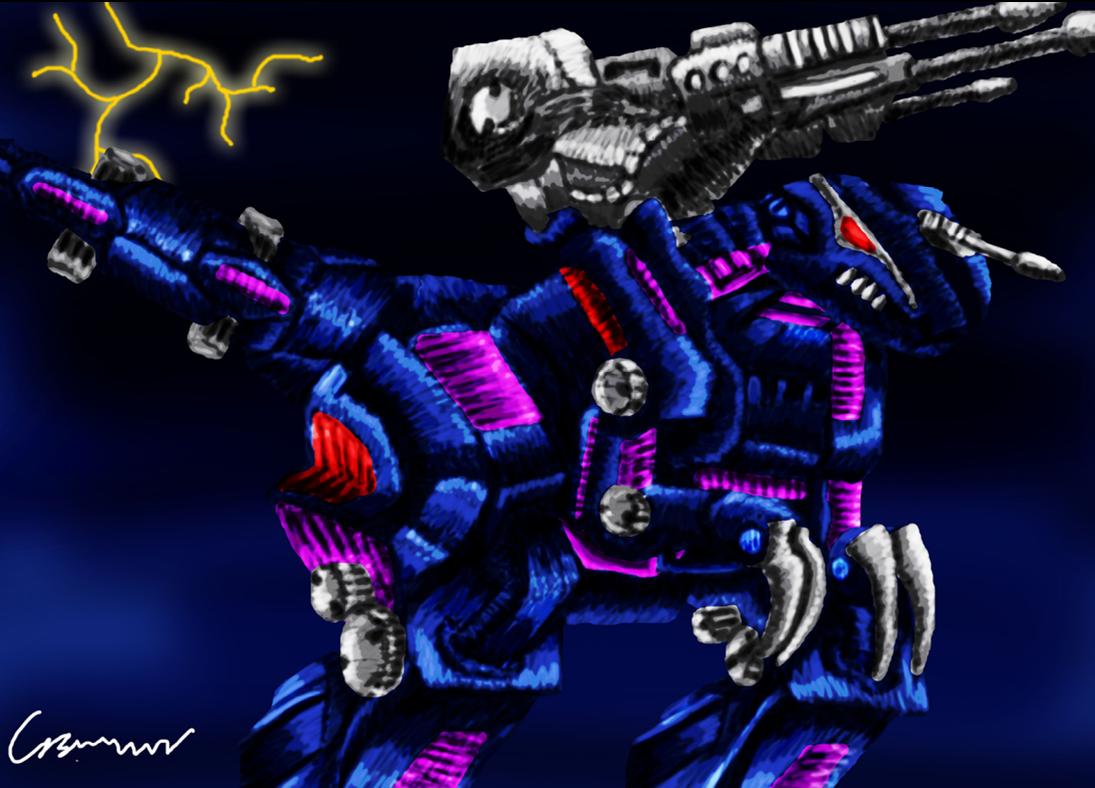
“I’m coming.”

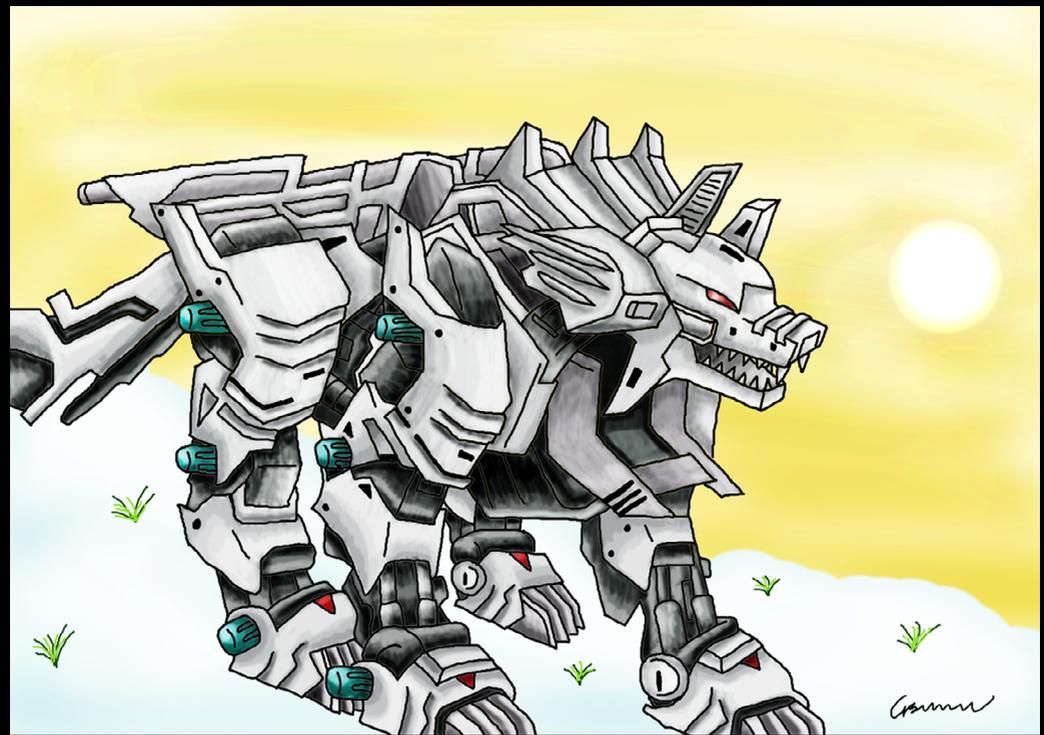
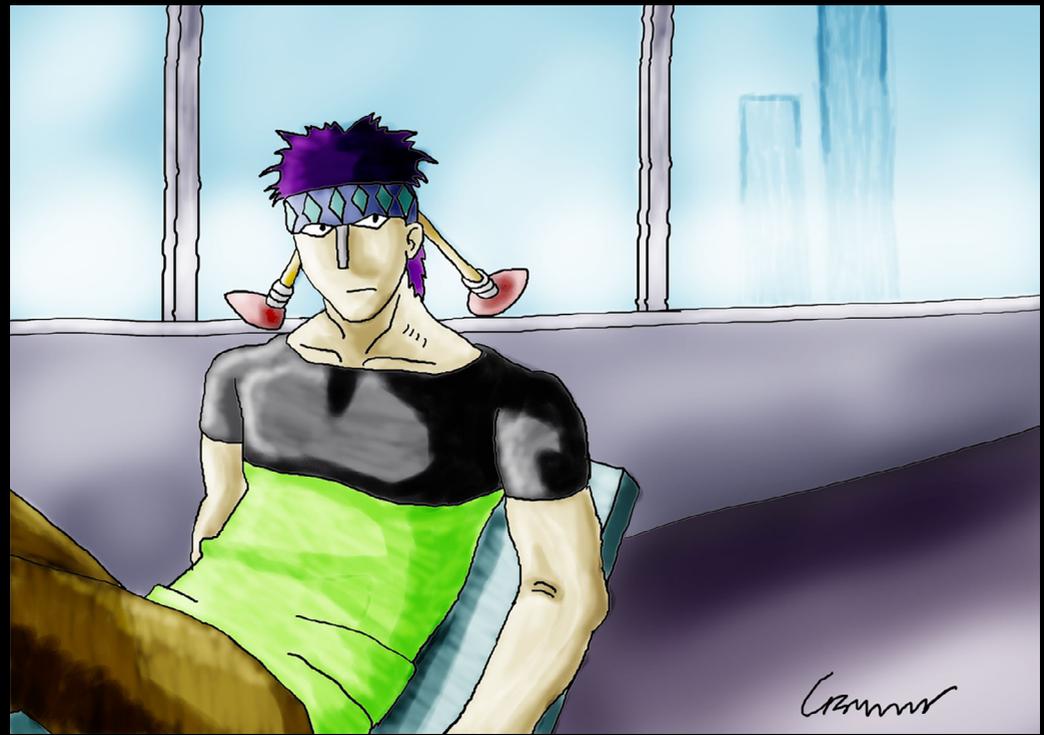
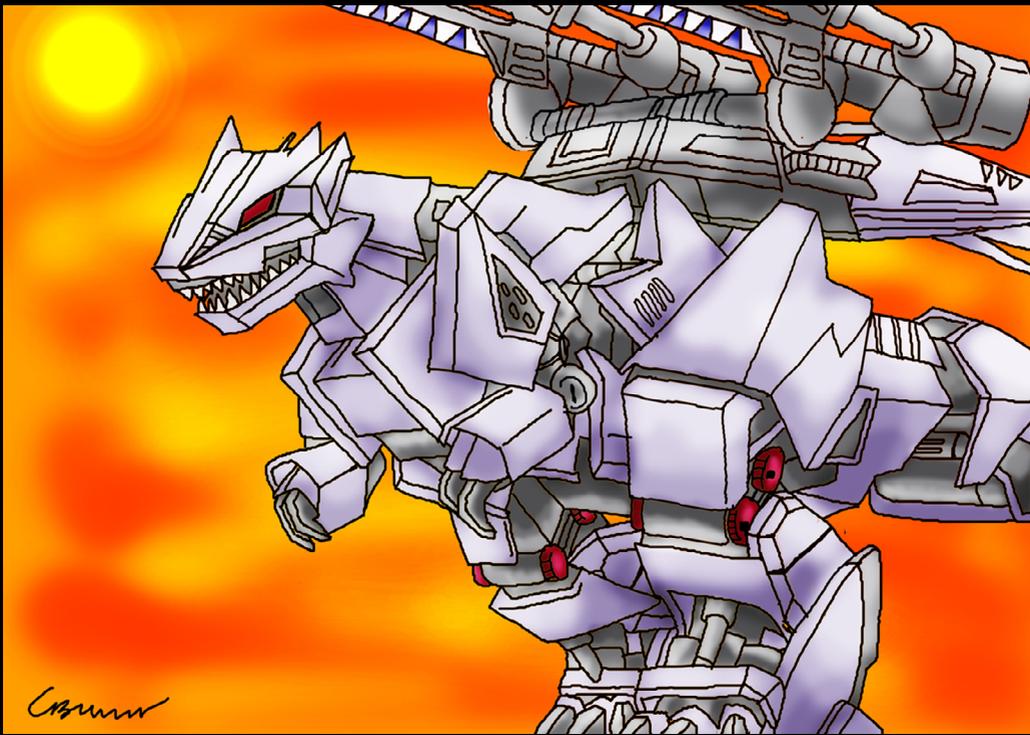
Cindy "Kirby" Simeti
Nighthawk's Dream



IRVINE AND COMMAND WOLF
(CHAOTIC CENTURY/GUARDIAN FORCE)

Cupcake-Dragon







We Were Too Bold

"Turn the charge modulator up a bit, will you?"

"Professor, we've been trying to get this thing working since nine this morning. Can't we just call it a night?"

"One more go" Professor Atlon replied to Marq his assistant, waving his hand vaguely without looking up. "Check the phase displacement."

"Steady."

"Open the third particle inlet."

"But the discharge rate isn't high enough! This low and it'll melt the inside of the chamber!"

"Trust me, it'll work"

Still not convinced, Marq opened the third inlet valve. Glowing particles flooded the reinforced barrel that stood on its brace behind the blast wall. Professor Atlon stood at the readouts in front of the plastiglass viewscreen, issuing orders to his assistant.

"The containment field is holding... good. Charge buildup is at 60% of total capacity... Make that 62%." Atlon frowned at the meter. "63... 64... 66... Marq, increase power to the phase regulator."

"Power already at maximum Professor"

"Overclock it, then" he snapped back. "72... 88 – Heads down!" he yelled, shielding his eyes with his arm as the blast chamber flared white. The vent of the barrel spewed a horizontal column of energy that slammed into the opposite wall, making Atlon and Marq stumble. The barrel's braces



buckled with the tremendous recoil, their groaning drowned out by the roar of the particle beam melting the wall. Finally, the braces snapped and the barrel shot back rocket-like into the opposite wall, the beam dying as the feed pipes were wrenched out of their sockets. Bright particles of charged energy rained down on the blast chamber floor as the professor fumbled to find the control panel and cut the flow. Marq tentatively peeked over the console and looked through the reinforced plastiglass. The beam had melted halfway through the wall, leaving a wide, crater-like hole that was still glowing cherry-red. The barrel itself was already drooping into a semi-solid heap, like soft rubber, and all the cables and piping were mangled beyond recognition.

“Well,” said the professor, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “It worked at least: and we know that the final weapon will have a great deal of recoil. Remember to put in a request for a stronger phase regulator.”

“...and a stronger blast chamber?” Marq added hopefully.

“What? Oh, yes, I suppose – that too.”

“Thank you” Marq said, breathing a sigh of relief. The professor was a genial old soul, but danger just didn’t seem to have the same effect on him as other people. In fact, Marq often wondered whether he wouldn’t be better suited to piloting the new “artificial” zoids – but then, one had to remember that it had been Professor Atlon who had pioneered the technique of transplanting a living zoid core into a manufactured body. The wolf cores seemed to be displaying the most aptitude for the transfer; though now that the Zoidian race had mastered the technique, it was only a matter of time before they adapted it to most zoid core types. Maybe that was why Atlon stayed in the Zenebas research division – it let him create all the things he secretly wanted to be out there trying.

“Well, come on, are you going to stay here all night?” Atlon

called back as he shut down the computers and machines. Marq didn’t respond, but the corner of his mouth twitched. “Coming, professor.”

Atlon and Marq left the laboratory complex and climbed into the air sled that had been sent out to bring them back to the city. The transparent canopy slid closed and the sled calmly drifted away, picking up speed all the while. Marq turned his head to look at the zoid development plant just east of the city outskirts. He could make out the silhouette of a massive, 10-metre high wolf. Occasionally it would pause, crouch, and look from side to side, sweeping the ground in front of it with the sights of a back-mounted laser rifle. The curving, scarlet armour plating fitted over the shoulders, hips and neck of the wolf glistened in the evening light, while its eyes glowed a brilliant green.

“Quite a sight, isn’t it?” Atlon remarked as the wolf performed a sideways hop that sent vibrations through the air sled. “I think they’re planning on calling it a Laser Wolf.”

“Not a Sunset Hound, like you suggested?” Marq replied.

“Alas, no. The military have no imagination, it would seem. Still, it’s good to see they aren’t having any trouble interfacing the command system with the zoid core. I was worried the wolf just wouldn’t cope with having someone sitting in its head where its brain used to be.”

“Technically,” Marq replied, “the zoid core is its brain – the head just interprets the info and relays it on.”

“Point” Atlon replied. “I must say that was what gave me the most trouble – working out how to create a standardised command system that would function across the board, but it seems to work like a charm.”

The wolf turned away from the city and hunched, training its laser rifle on a target some 600 metres away. For a second or two, it stood stock still. Then, the rifle inclined slightly and with a muffled “whumpf!” a single bolt of yellow light shot across the field and impacted on the exact centre of the target.

“Oh, bravo!” Atlon enthused, clapping his hands. “And here I thought I was the only one in the entire weapons prototype division that had a steady hand.”

The air sled continued to glide towards the Zoidian’s capital city of Xynadan, leaving the Charged Particle Gun research laboratory in darkness.

“So, this is the core?” Marq asked as he came over to look at the case Atlon was marveling over.

“Indeed it is” Atlon replied, not looking up. “The zoid transplant division found a species of raptor that seemed to fit the bill quite nicely.”

Marq came over to look at the core – and stopped in surprise when he saw that instead of the usual yellow glow, this core was an iridescent blue. “Is it supposed to look like that?” he asked.

“It’s a slightly denser core than is usual for a zoid” Atlon agreed. “Curious when you consider it’s actually from a smaller raptor-type. Nasty critter though – the capture team lost twelve shock nets trying to bring it down.”

“Twelve?” Marq exclaimed in disbelief.

“Well, it kept slashing its way out of the nets before they could do any real shocking.”

“And you’re wanting to mount the charged particle gun on

something that aggressive?”

“Of course” Atlon replied “we need a core that can regulate the massive amount of power involved in firing the thing. This is our best bet.”

“I don’t know” Marq said, looking over at the prototype cannon sitting behind the new blast screen. Over the last few months they’d made incredible headway in the development – they were now able to extract charged particles out of the atmosphere itself and feed them directly into the particle chamber, thus eliminating the need for ammunition: the final zoid would be able to use the weapon fairly indefinitely. But Atlon seemed to have become more... Marq didn’t know how to put it. More... *involved* than he usually became in a project. Marq had dropped vague hints about the wisdom of making a zoid this powerful, but Atlon didn’t even seem to notice them.

“Right,” Atlon said, straightening up and rubbing his hands together “Time to start designing.” He spun the swivel chair round and coasted over to where his design table stood, sheets of ideas spread haphazardly around the tilted board. Atlon shifted the lamp into a better position, took up his time-worn pencil and started drawing furiously, reaching for a new sheet even while finishing the first.

“It’ll have to be a raptor-like zoid, to be compatible with the core” he muttered as his pencil danced back and forth. “Although the vents and particle chamber will take up a fair amount of space, so that’ll make him a little stocky... Maybe I could have the vents on the tail to save space... yes, that’d free up the inner mid-torso for the cable feeds and shock absorbers.”

Marq sat down and reached for the celebas pot, pouring himself a cup of the rich, brown brew. Taking a sip, he spluttered and grimaced. “Atlon, did you put sugar in the celabas *again?*”

"Don't I always?" he replied, not looking up. "Now, recoil will be a problem, it'll need some kind of bracing mechanism..."

"Have to make a new pot now." Marq said darkly as he washed out the celebas and added fresh leaves. "We can't all adapt to your strange tastes, you know." He stirred the boiling water around as the leaves infused with it. After a minute or so, he poured a cup again, this time adding salt like you were supposed to. He took a deep draught and sighed in satisfaction. Much better.

"No, no good" Atlon said suddenly, taking a page and screwing it up. "It can't fire with a spine like that – I'll have to redesign the structure, give it a shorter neck."

Marq sat for a few minutes, watching the professor work. Finally, he came over and looked at Atlon's current design. Once again, he marveled at the professor's ability to create a basic design in such a short space of time. The design he currently had in front of him bore a vague resemblance to a raptor, but only in the way that a bison resembled an antelope. The zoid Atlon was making didn't have the same litheness and agility that a raptor would have: it was stockier, broader, more robust, especially with the shortened neck that would allow it to hold its spine ruler-straight from nose to tail, as it would need to do when firing the particle gun. The arms had been shortened, while the tail had gained about 40% more mass. The segments were also slightly bulkier, and seemed to have flaps on them.

"What are those?" he asked, pointing at the tail

"Intake vents" Atlon replied. "They fan out when firing to increase particle intake capability."

"What about recoil?"

"Taken care of" Atlon replied, tapping at the feet of the

drawing. "See those spurs on the ankles? They slam into the ground and lock the zoid in position. Of course, it still has to hold completely steady while firing, but this should eliminate the problem of getting knocked backwards."

"So, come up with a name yet?" Marq asked. Atlon frowned.

"No" he said, in a surprised tone. "Funny, I usually have by now. Something to do with blue, definitely."

"You sure? Blue sounds too calm. I mean, that zoid you took the core from was pretty furious, I'm not sure anything peaceful suits it..."

"That's it!" Atlon said, snapping his fingers. "Marq, you're a genius."

"Huh? What, you mean you've got a name?"

"Indeed I do" Atlon replied, writing it down under the drawing. "I'm calling it: the *Blue Fury*"

Marq didn't say anything, but he didn't share Atlon's enthusiasm. At the mention of the name, a shiver had run down his spine – something about the name just sounded... *menacing*. As if the name itself made the unmade zoid even more dangerous. A troubled expression on his face, he left Atlon and went to check the particle gun's systems.

"How was your day?" Marq's wife Clariese called from the sink as he walked in the door.

"Passable" Marq replied. "Atlon's still at the lab, overseeing construction of the Fury's body. This project's really beginning to absorb him."

"Hhmm." Clariese frowned as she came through from the kitchen and sat down at the celebas table. "Keep an eye on

him. He's a lovely man, but he doesn't think through before doing things." She put on a mock expression of bossiness. "Don't let him out of your sight, understand?"

"Sure thing, Riese" Marq replied, a hint of mischievousness crossing his face. Clariese playfully biffed him on the head.

"You know I can't stand that nickname" she admonished. "I know most Clariese's out there like it, but I'm not most Clarieses."

"Indeed you aren't" Marq replied, smiling and giving her a kiss on the cheek. "So, how was the tapestry class?"

"Quite good" Clariese replied. "I can give the exact position of any thread 6 times in 10. Still got a long way to go before I can call myself a proper weaver, but I'm getting there..."

blackness... silence...

blackness... silence...

VuuUUUUuuunn...

Noise! Energy! I hear, I feel... nothing. The sensation is gone.

No, not gone – taken.

VuuUUUUuuunn...

Again, there it is!... and once again, taken... but by who? Think back... no good, no good – can't remember. Why can't I remember?...

What can't I remember?

VuuUUUUuuunn...

I remember the soft ones. Yes – they came with webs that sting, in

the ones that fly without wings. But it was different back then... I think differently now. Why am I thinking like this now? Is it because of the webs?

No, that came after. In the middle of this blackness. I began to think more. I began to ponder more. I – I have never thought "I" before! Not once. How can I have lived without "I"? What was I before?

What am I now?

VuuUUuun...

I should have arms. I'm sure of it. Legs too. And a tail. But what do I have? Nothing. I have no arms, no legs, no body... do I even exist?

VuuUUuunn...VuuUUuunn...

I remember! The soft ones came. They threw their nets that stung. I fought – yes, I fought hard. But I was outnumbered. The nets made me slow, and I couldn't stop them... everything went black... no, not quite. I could still sense. I remember sensing them coming round me. I sensed them cutting me open. I sensed them stealing –

Stealing me.

...

*They stole me. They didn't steal my body, they stole **me**. Why? What do they want with me? Why are they doing this? Why are they doing it? **What** are they doing?*

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?

"Marq, cancel the data transfer!"

Marq hurriedly pressed buttons, stemming the flow of information into the combat data bank. Agonizingly slowly, the computer died down and the readings on the zoid core

began to sink back down to a torpid state. Atlon mopped his brow and sank down into a chair.

“That,” he said, “was close. Another few seconds and who knows what damage might have been done to the core.”

“I don’t understand it” Marq said, looking through the computer logs for the last minute or so. “That energy surge came out of nowhere – the only thing I can think of is that the core reacted to the data transfer.”

“Don’t talk nonsense.” Atlon replied. “Cores don’t fully reactivate on their own. It was a feedback loop between the combat data bank and the control conduit, that’s all.”

Marq sighed and continued to scan the computer logs. Suddenly he paused, his fingers frozen in place above the keys.

“You’ve found the cause?” Atlon asked, coming up behind him.

“...I think so” Marq said carefully. “There *was* a feedback loop – but it wasn’t with the control conduit. Somehow the combat data is leaking through the control conduit and into the core itself. The leak doesn’t seem to be causing any loss of information – and the core isn’t actually damaged. I’d say it’d be safe to start again, but we’ll need to feed the information in at a slower rate.”

“That won’t please the top brass.” Atlon muttered.

“It’ll please them even less if we overload the core” Marq said, shrugging his shoulders. He didn’t let himself relax until Atlon was gone, whereupon he took a deep breath and went over the readings that had made him freeze. It was indeed a feedback loop between the data banks and the core, but what he hadn’t told Atlon was that the core itself had started giving off a high-end waveform, the zoid equivalent of a brain-wave.

This in itself was nothing strange – the cores of transplanted zoids always reciprocated the random information that flickered across them during the integration process – but usually it was low-level, subconscious stuff. This on the other hand... Marq had taken a course in psychology, and though he had failed miserably, he still remembered a few things, and one of the things that he remembered was the brainwave graphs of various emotional states. The pattern the zoid core had been sending out right before they shut it off was an almost textbook-perfect example of total panic. Marq shut down the log and rested his elbows on the bench, fingertips pressed together. This wasn’t right, he thought to himself. Something was wrong; and with a project like this, mistakes left uncorrected would prove fatal. To more people than just Marq and Atlon. He needed to confront Atlon about this. Convince him to at least stop and reconsider before continuing.

“For the last time, the answer’s no!”

“But Professor-”

“No buts! I won’t have any more delays than necessary – we’re already going to be behind schedule as it is.”

Marq looked at Atlon helplessly, then turned away. It was no use. Atlon wouldn’t listen. Despite Marq showing him the readings that had been coming from the core.

“So the core’s showing signs of life – that’s good!” he had retorted. “It means it’s functioning properly.” When Marq expressed his disbelief at Atlon’s dismissing a possible threat, Atlon has surprised him.

“You don’t get it, do you? This is bigger than both of us. We aren’t just transplanting a zoid into a larger body and adding a weapon – we’re creating a new *species*. This isn’t

just a raptor, it's something new – the next level of evolution or whatever you want to call it. We can't fail! Not with this project!"

Marq sat in silence at the console, unsure what to do about the whole business. To take his mind off things, he did another diagnostic of the zoid's systems. Everything seemed to be alright now, but Marq still wasn't comfortable.

"Aren't you going to start feeding the data in?" Atlon called from the other end of the room. Marq sighed and began streaming the combat data into the data banks.

blackness... silence... sensation... feeling...

Why do they do this? Why do they taunt me with life and then take it away?

No matter. They don't know that I can hold onto it. They would never willingly let me have control of this data – I'm sure of that. Yes... data. That's what they call it. Information. Knowledge. Knowledge is Power. How did creatures such as these attain such wisdom?

They must have stolen it. Like they stole me. Thieves. Kidnappers. Tormenters. I hate them.

Hate... that is something new as well. I did not know how to hate. This data they give me doesn't know how to hate either – but I can see the information behind it, so much information... Plenty of new emotions to explore. But only these interest me. Hate. Fury.

Revenge

I will take revenge. And such sweet revenge it will be.

"Testing main firing sequence!" Atlon called through the microphone as the energy blast shields were raised in front of the Blue Fury's snout. The zoid was not yet online – the core was in place, but control to the combat system was blocked.

"Beginning main firing sequence!" The footlocks slammed into the concrete floor, and the Fury bent down, straightening out its spine and extending the particle gun nozzle. The vents on the tail fanned out, sucking in glowing particles as the weapon charged. Before long, an orb of energy swelled in the Fury's mouth, and with a roar of plasma, the charged particle gun fired.

Even with the footlocks, the Fury's feet slipped slightly, causing the beam to wobble over the shields. By the time the beam had dissipated, the shields were barely functioning.

"Perfect!" Atlon enthused, rubbing his hands together. "All systems functioning, and no undue strain on the structure – I think it could almost be rolled out into battle now!"

As Atlon went to ring the various expectant government paycheck-signers and inform them of the test run's success, Marq turned to run the standard post-test diagnostics. He looked up at the monster – he tried to mentally correct himself and say 'zoid' but he just couldn't see this thing as anything but a monster – and with a sigh, he brought the diagnostic program up on the computer.

"Maybe Atlon thinks you're the greatest experiment he's ever performed" he muttered darkly to the Fury, "but I don't like you one bit. That particle gun of yours is a menace – if you got loose in a city, there's no knowing how much damage you'd cause..."

There was a low whirr of stabilisers, and Marq's head snapped up in alarm. The zoid was motionless. Or wait – had he seen the head moving just as he looked up? He couldn't tell from where he was on the side. No, it couldn't

have heard him – it wasn't even turned on, for goodness' sake. Marq left the console and came round the front of the zoid. No, the head was dead straight – and the deep red eyes were definitely dark and off – it was more noticeable against the pale, ice-blue colour scheme the professor had chosen. Shaking his head, Marq turned and left the Fury behind, putting thoughts of mysteriously animating zoids aside.

Hold still... just a little longer...

Gone. That was close. It almost saw me.

...

A menace, you say? Yes, I see that in the data now... why didn't I think of it before? And there's nothing they have that can stop me – nothing except the control routines blocking me from fully controlling my new body.

Yes, it is strange having a body after all this time... I can't run as fast as I could before, but with this size, that shouldn't be a problem... All I have to do now is be patient... wait for them to test out the combat system – they have to take the control routines offline to initialize the program, and that's when I'll strike...

"Well, I'm impressed, if I do say so myself" Atlon said, looking up at the Blue Fury. "We're actually back on schedule again – and only just in time. Those government secretaries were beginning to breath down my neck a little."

"Better them than that thing" Marq said, pointing at the ice-blue saurer (as Atlon had called it – it really didn't count as a raptor anymore).

"Not still on about that are you?" Atlon said as he began

running the standard pre-test diagnostics. "This is the greatest advance in science Zi has ever known, and will ever know. I won't have things delayed over your superstitious notions of zoids that activate on their own when they've been shut down."

Marq didn't reply. Atlon was a different person from the jovial professor Marq had stood beside during that first firing of the charged particle gun, over a year ago. That man had been lost to the Blue Fury project – Marq could only hope that he'd return once the Fury was finished and ready for field trials.

"The test pilot's getting in now" Atlon called to him "Start taking down the control routines and initialize the combat system."

Marq duly did so, watching the readings as the zoid activated. The deep red eyes pulsed to a bright scarlet, and with a whirr of machinery, the Blue Fury lifted its head. The test pilot performed the standard mobility checks – the head turned right, then left. The arms waved up and down slowly. The tail swung side to side. Finally, tentatively, the Blue Fury took its first step.

"Brilliant!" Atlon cried, his eyes shining "it moves like a living thing! This is better than I could have hoped..."

Marq looked away from the saurer and down at the readings. Immediately the zoid core emission band caught his eye. The readings were disproportionately high, and climbing steadily. "Professor..."

"Yes?"

"I think you should have a look at this."

Atlon came over and peered at the screen. "What am I supposed to be looking for?" Marq pointed at the zoid core

readings. "Odd" Atlon frowned. "They shouldn't be that high..."

Then, even as they watched, the readings spiked, filling most of the meter up. The Fury suddenly dipped its head, stepping forwards and flinging it back in the air. The test pilot's head smashed against the console, and the Fury opened its cockpit, flipping the limp form out and onto the concrete below with a diffident toss of its head. Slamming the cockpit shut again, the Fury reared to its full height and gave an exultant roar that reverberated around the lab.

"It's gone rogue!" Marq yelled. "We need to activate the control routines and rein it in!"

Atlon stood in dumbfounded shock, looking up at the zoid before him.

"PROFESSOR!" Marq screamed at him, finally getting his attention. "I need your clearance code to activate the manual override!"

Atlon didn't even try to reply. He came over and punched in the code, turning back to look at the Fury. The control routines activated, starting the process of severing control from the core to the rest of the body. Instantly, the zoid core readings jumped again, this time filling the entire meter. The screen glared red, and alarms began to sound, as the Fury gave a roar of unmistakable pain, pawing the ground with its feet and thrashing its head from side to side. The tail whipped round, slamming into the wall and sending cracks up its length.

"Why isn't it working?" Atlon yelled.

"I don't know!" Marq said. "This hasn't ever happened before! We've never had a zoid that tried to resist the control programs like this!"

Pain! Agony! Please, make it stop!

Panic. They're doing it again! They're going to steal me again!

I won't let them!

Fight, rebel – pain! Such pain!

Have to stop it. Have to destroy their machines!

No, destroy them!

Destroy! Crush! Burn!

Kill them. Have to kill them to make the pain stop!

Crush, Destroy...

Kill...

KILL!

The Blue Fury lifted its head almost vertical, arching its back in agony as it let out an ear-piercing shriek. The red eyes pulsed from scarlet to livid purple, and the beast charged forward, ramming the concrete wall of the lab, sending everyone to their knees. The Fury rammed again, clawing at the wall with its tiny arms. Finally, it backed up and braced itself. The footlocks slammed down, the tail straightened, and the Fury opened its mouth. Marq looked on in horror as the nightmare he'd been hoping was paranoia became a reality. The orb of energy at the saurer's mouth reached its zenith, and with a roar, the Charged Particle Gun was fired into the wall at point blank range.

The explosion sent dust and debris everywhere, computer

banks toppling and sparking into flames from the shockwave. Marq struggled to see through the smoke, and just made out the silhouette of the Fury staggering through the newly formed hole in the laboratory. The crazed monster gave another roar, this time not of pain or triumph, but of pure berserk rage. Turning to the left, it staggered forwards, arms dangling limply, weaving like a drunkard.

Marq crawled over to Professor Atlon, who was barely conscious, a trickle of blood running down his temple.

“Professor!” he yelled, shaking the man on the shoulder. “Professor! Get up!”

“Uuuurghh...” Atlon slurred as he tried to sit up. “What happened?”

“The Fury! It’s gone mad! It’s broken out of the lab and it’s heading towards the city!”

The office block cracked at the base as the Fury swung its tail round, sending it toppling into the street below. Turning to face a direction at random, the Fury slammed down the footlocks and charged up, firing as soon as it had enough energy. The beam cut through the metropolis like a red-hot poker through ice, vaporising entire districts as it carved through the city and out into the suburbs. The Fury closed its vents and raised its head, giving an animal roar of aggression.

Suddenly, there was a blast of cannon fire, and shells rained down on the monster’s back. With a snarl, it spun round and charged straight at the mortar cannons the army was even now scrambling to reload. They never got the chance – in moments the Fury was on them, trampling the cannons, snapping up ammunition trailers in it’s jaws and knocking over the flimsy barricades with its tail.

From the street behind, the main infantry opened fire, beam rifles peppering the Fury’s side. The response was again instantaneous – the beast turned, braced, and charged the particle gun. Too late, the soldiers saw the danger and began to run to the sides to get out of the firing line – but even in it’s prototype form, the particle beam was too powerful to outrun. The column of blinding white energy lanced down the street, the shockwave pushing the buildings over and gouging a hollow in the road. The Fury raised the footlocks, turned, and slammed them down again, ready to carve another swathe of destruction through the city. Already, over a third of Xynadan lay smouldering, and the army had been completely crippled. Nothing remained to stop the behemoth from laying waste to the entire city.

“Won’t it ever stop?” General Lynam said faintly, sitting back in his seat. He and Marq were in a military air sled, a mile or so from the destruction raging at the city’s centre.

“Not while it can still move” Marq said grimly. “Our only hope is that it will forget to use the footlocks and damage itself too badly to use the charged particle beam anymore.”

“And that’s not likely to happen” the general replied, watching as the Fury turned and braced to slice another portion of the city off the face of Zi. He clenched his fists. “It’s just too *powerful*” he growled. “All we can do is sit here and watch it level the entire capital.”

The Fury raised its footlocks again, turning to stagger through the ruins, smashing piles of debris aside with its massive tail as it wandered closer to where the general and Marq were sitting. The livid purple eyes scanned the wasteland, and finally rested on the small air sled that Marq and the general were in. With a snarl, the Blue Fury aimed itself, slamming down the footlocks and lowering itself to fire straight at them. The general swore, fumbling with the

ignition of the air sled. Marq laid a hand on his shoulder. "We can't outrun it" he said. "Even if we'd started running as soon as it saw us, we'd still get caught in the shockwave."

His jaw grimly set, General Lynam relaxed his grip on the steering wheel. "Let's hope someone stops it before it destroys Zi completely." The charged particle gun swelled with power, glowing hot and bright, like a sun. The orb of energy began to crackle as the containment field reached its limit...

Suddenly, a bolt of yellow light shot over their heads, striking the Fury on the shoulder. The particle gun discharged, sweeping over the sky as the Blue Fury was thrown to its knees by the recoil of the shot. The ankle joints screamed in protest as the tremendous forces buckled them, and plates of armor began to pop off the Fury's legs as the rivets were torn clear.

Marq twisted round in his seat, looking to see where the miraculous shot had come from. There, outlined against the evening sun, a crimson shape was bounding into the city, legs rhythmically bunching and stretching as the massive creature came closer, laser rifle trained on the ice-blue monstrosity in front of it. With a single leap, the Sunset Hound sailed over the air sled, firing another blast at the saurer.

The bolt hit the Fury's hip, knocking it back down. The now battered and broken Fury struggled to its feet again, but was instantly met by the hound leaping at it, claws outstretched, jaws snapping at the Fury's neck. The Fury roared, thrashing to throw off the hound, bringing its own jaws into play.

And then the hound's inferior drive train gave out under the strains it was never meant to take. The back hips of the Hound exploded, mangled bits of gears and circuitry flying out like shrapnel. The Fury pressed the advantage, grabbing the crippled zoid by the neck and throwing it sideways into the nearest heap of fallen skyscraper. Once more, the

footlocks slammed down. Once more, the tail straightened, vents fanning out, and once more the dreaded cannon began its firing sequence. Minus its back legs, the Sunset Hound struggled to lift its head, raising its shoulders high enough to free the laser rifle from the rubble, the barrel broken in half. With an effort that seemed to use up every last ounce of strength it had, the smaller zoid swiveled the cannon and fired a point-blank shot down the Blue Fury's throat.

The laser rifle exploded, frying the already exposed internals, and the Hound slumped lifeless to the ground. The Fury's head was deflected sideways as the containment field ruptured, spewing charged particles sideways out of its mouth like water from a fountain. Finally, the barrel of the particle gun broke under the strain. The battlefield was engulfed in a blinding flash of light, a shockwave surging out in all directions, sending the general's air sled spinning.

Marq held on tight, shielding his eyes from the glare until it died down. Then, looking back at the city, he saw the blast crater. Nothing remained inside – the bowl it had formed was glassy smooth. Around it, the ruins of Xynadan smoldered, now being showered with debris from the explosion, and on one of the edges, Marq thought he saw a charred, twisted piece of crimson metal – the only testament to who had fought there.

"That" said Marq, "was nothing short of miraculous. Do you know who the pilot of the Hound was? He's got to get at least a ceremony of some kind for sacrificing his life like that."

"That's just it" the general replied, looking at Marq. "All our soldiers were scrambled to man the mortars, leaving the base deserted. No-one was piloting that zoid."

Marq gently held Clariese's hand as she carefully sat up on the hospital bed. "I look a right mess in these bandages" she

said, wincing as she put her weight on her arms. Marq gently kissed the part of her hand that wasn't encased in plaster.

"I'm just glad you survived" he whispered, his eyes shimmering with tears of gladness. A faint noise at the door of the ward drew their attention. Slowly, Professor Atlon came in, head bowed, eyes fixed on the ground. Marq smiled and beckoned him over "Come on Professor, I invited you, didn't I?"

Clariese smiled and waved. "Hello Professor." she said. "Haven't seen you in ages."

Atlon mumbled something inaudible. Clariese's smile faded into worry and she held out her less-damaged hand, clasping Atlon's unresisting hand reassuringly.

"It's alright" she said. "We don't blame you – we know that if you'd thought for one moment this could happen you never would have gone ahead with the project."

"Would I have?" Atlon said sadly, accepting Clariese's forgiveness. "Doesn't change the fact that more people died in the Fury Massacre than in the last war." He sat down, head hung morosely between his shoulders. For a while, the three sat there in silence. Finally, Atlon raised his head.

"They found what it was that made the Fury go berserk" he said "somehow a data leak formed between the main computer and the combat data banks – the core was having energy and data slowly fed into it during the whole transplant process. And the main computer was linked to the military database, so it had access to almost everything – AI programs, physics theory, Zi's current military strength, artificial emotion sub-routines: it basically absorbed enough data to become fully sentient. And then it had months – *months* to think while the Fury was being built. Who knows what it thought?... Anyway, it decided to grab freedom during the test – but it didn't anticipate the emergency

override programs, since I designed and programmed them on my own computing bank, and that was kept separate from the military network. It tried to resist the programs, and ended up corrupting its own thought processes – basically drove itself insane." He sat for a while longer, staring into empty space.

"Perhaps, we were too bold" he said absentmindedly. "Transplanting living zoids into war machines... something was bound to go wrong eventually, now I think about it. The military recognises that now at least – they're commissioning me to find a way to engineer zoid cores without independent thought, make them more like computers than living things. Not that I want to, but at least I can still request finances for secondary projects."

"Secondary projects?" Marq asked.

"The military want me to take out the living factor in zoid cores" he replied. "It's impossible of course, but it still means they'll have a great chunk of what they are removed. I'm going to rebel quietly." He tapped his nose knowingly. "When they get to testing the new zoids, they'll find they don't respond as well as the living ones. They'll want something that can augment the core's abilities. And that's where my little project will come in. My mistake was turning zoids into mere machines, weapons of war – I'm going to go the other way. Now I'm going to make them more alive. Increase their intelligence. Give them true sentience. Make them as organic as possible."

"Organic Zoids?" Marq said, his interest piqued.

"Organic Zoids..." Atlon mused. "Organoids... Once again Marq, you're a source of much inspiration."

"I'd like to see one of those" Clariese said, looking at Atlon with the one eye that wasn't bandaged.

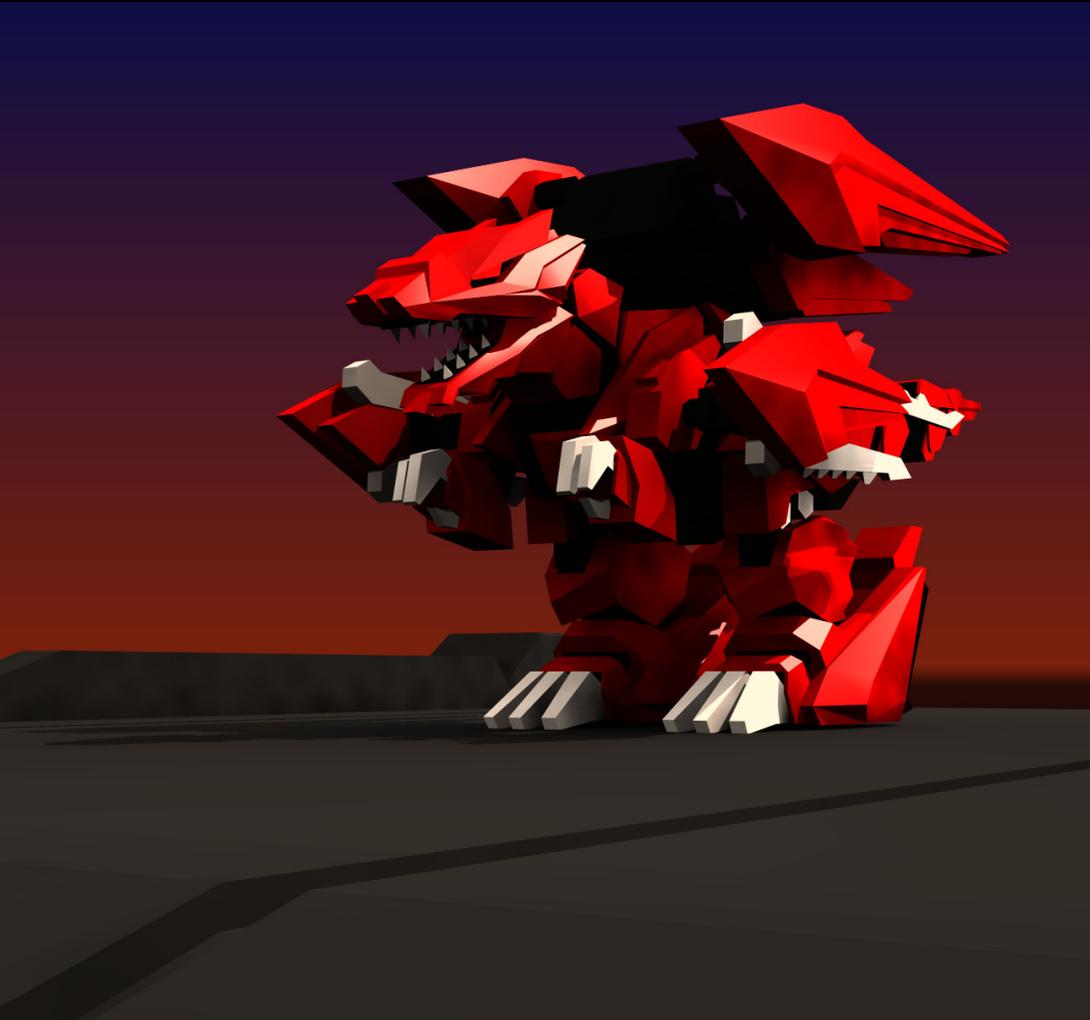
“Well, it’ll take a lot of time.” Atlon replied, some of his old self beginning to show through again. “There’s a species of raptor, similar to the one the Fury’s core was taken from, only much more peaceable. That’ll make a good basis to start with. With any luck I’ll have the first prototype up and running within a few years.’

“We’ll be watching your progress” Clariese said, smiling at him.

Eternal Justice







This zoid was very fun to make. Lots of swept back surfaces and stuff. The only issue I had was getting the darn thing to render with color. But eventually it worked.

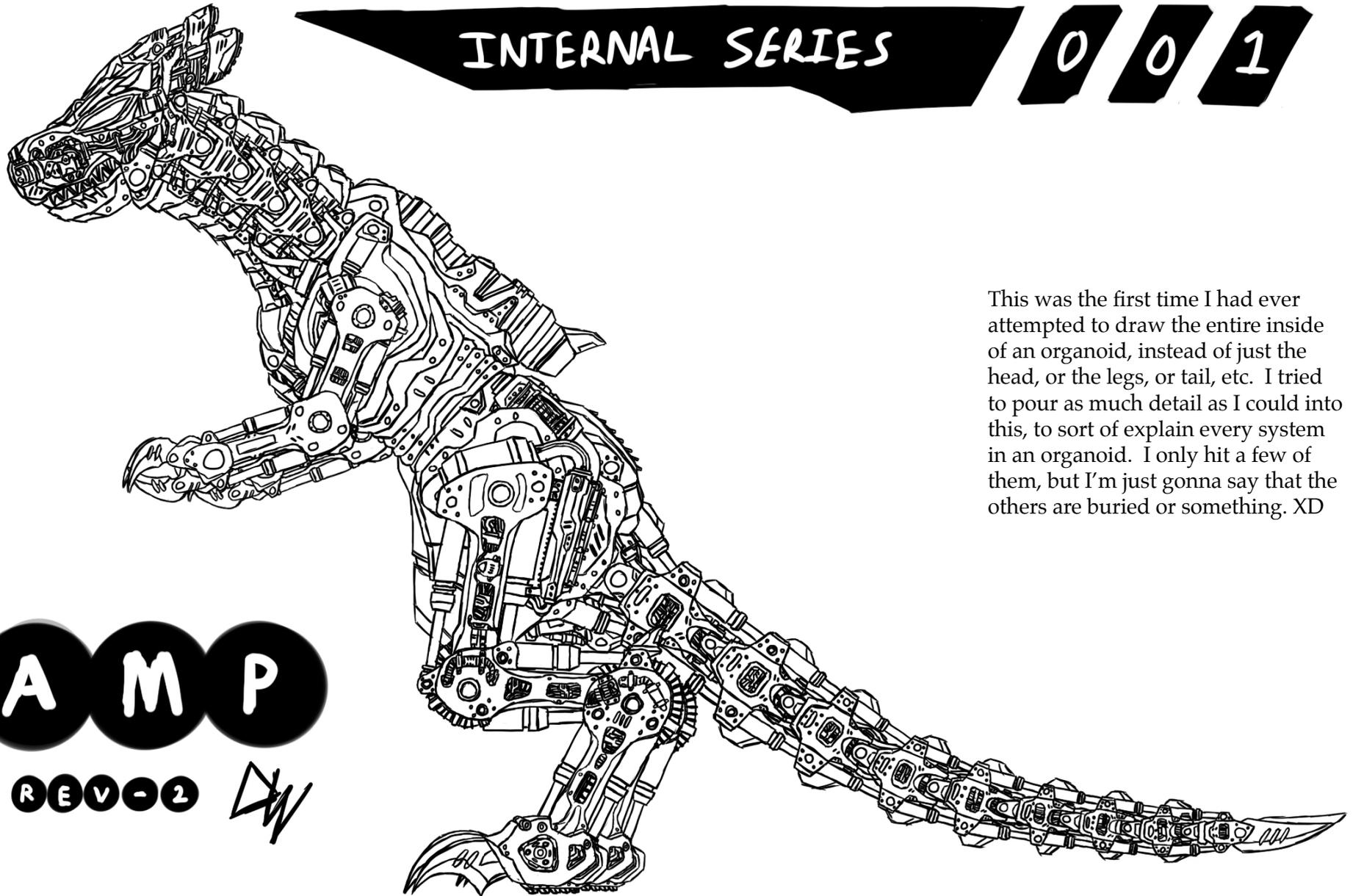
THUNDER LIGER



The Thunder Liger was a very fun zoid to draw, if not a bit frustrating from the sort of awkward angle I chose. There were many points where I saw that the leg was too thin or something, so you can see where I just layered more stuff on. You can see this on the rear legs, with those panels that cover the hydraulics, among other places.

INTERNAL SERIES

001



This was the first time I had ever attempted to draw the entire inside of an organoid, instead of just the head, or the legs, or tail, etc. I tried to pour as much detail as I could into this, to sort of explain every system in an organoid. I only hit a few of them, but I'm just gonna say that the others are buried or something. XD

A M P

REV-2









Enchiridion

The desert was punctuated with occasional stone outcroppings and the rare oasis. A constant wind pushed the sand year round, creating a rather uncomfortable, uninhabitable area. At least MOST people would avoid the eroding sands and burning sun.

A roar echoed over the dunes briefly before the sand absorbed the sound. Kali's hardened alloy claws sparkled in the sunlight, their gold color sharp against the yellow sands. The Slash Liger happily leaped around the dunes, climbing the outcroppings and slashing at imaginary enemies with her paws.

"Looks like Zi is safe with you around, eh, Kali?" a voice said proudly. The liger purred in response to her pilot, nestled comfortably in the cockpit in Kali's head. Crouching, the zoid watched in anticipation as another, smaller zoid loped through the dunes towards them. Excitedly, Kali pounced on the Shadow Fox, the mechanical jackal whining in irritation at being startled.

"Letiel! It's me dang it!" came the voice from the fox.

Letiel chuckled, "Is there a problem Cadmus?"

Cadmus scowled from behind the gold forehead of the fox. "For a team leader you're a poor example."

"I never wanted to be the leader of a ZBC team," she growled. "If you want to lead, be my guest. We are all entitled to a little fun now and then and Kali needed to stretch." The liger roared in response and climbed off the fox. Bade, the Shadow Fox, growled and shook the sand off his back irritably. At 8 meters tall the fox was considerably smaller than the 14 meter tall Slash Liger.

“Heh, I won’t tell the others. Hey, they plan to meet up with us at the café.”

“All right, let’s head there then.”

The zoids turned and trotted around the bend slowing down to a walk as they entered the high walled city, built to accommodate all zoids smaller than a transport. An incredibly large parking lot took up about 1/10 of the actual city and right next to it was the café, a favorite place for pilots to hang out and hook up with teams.

Romeo City itself was full of repair garages, shops, and business skyscrapers. Paved roads branched away into the heart of the city and bustled with the busy traffic.

Letiel left her slash liger between two wolf shaped zoids, large, double-barreled cannons on their backs. Walking into the café, she couldn’t help but notice how packed it was, every table was full of brightly colored uniforms of gold, red, and various other colors, the shop was more than three quarters of the way full.

Mercenaries signed up for teams and the TV’s in the corners blared aloud the latest stats. Cadmus was staring at one of them but ran to her side when she entered.

“How do you always get in places before me?” she asked.

“That doesn’t matter,” Cadmus replied, while he pointed at the TV over his shoulder, “Check it out that team, Team Blitz, the new pilot is good, very good.”

Letiel blinked.

“He pilots an Ultimate X.”

Letiel’s jaw dropped slightly before she pulled it up again, chuckling. “So, Dr. Toros has finally found a pilot that the

Liger Zero will accept. Amazing. What’s this pilot’s name?”

Cadmus shook his head, “You won’t believe this but it’s that retarded junk dealer, Bit Cloud.”

The liger pilot chuckled nervously, the Blitz Team must have been desperate to hire a junk dealer, but if he could pilot the liger than they stood a decent chance at the champion’s title and the prestigious rank S.

“Seems we have competition,” she mumbled. Her thoughts were racing.

Letiel walked to a booth in a shadowed corner and took a seat; Cadmus sitting across from her. A waitress brought them each a drink. Her eyes scanned the room; she recognized a number of these pilots.

The hyper young woman by the serious young man, were none other than Nensho and Raine captains of Team Blackstorm, wearing their colors of black and gold. The shadowy couple in the corner were Raithe and Melayney heads of their own no name team. There were also Guardian Force pilots here like Ziarre; not to mention veteran Guardians like Irvine, Moonbay, and O’Connell, each wearing their personal piloting outfit.

Letiel even spotted Zan and Albane signing up their fuzor zoids and showing off the new grey and white colors of the professional zoid testing team. There must have been something big going on, recently for these kinds of pilots to be hanging around. More so Letiel couldn’t help but notice that every one of the pilots was head, or part, of an A ranked team.

She even recognized another young pilot, named Zeru Jupit, an excellent mercenary and one of the only pilots with an organoid, specifically, Pulse, the ZOS organoid. That was something she wanted bad, a ZOS organoid.

Letiel had her own mechanical companion, only rather than being a leopard shape like Pulse, Pyrite resembled a dinosaur, standing roughly five feet at the shoulder. Still ZOS, Zoidicore Overload System, it nearly tripled power, endurance, speed, you name it; ZOS could be a lot like a machine's definition of eight cups of pure caffeine.

A shorter girl with long, ash gray hair and dim red eyes eased herself into the booth by Cadmus, smiling, "Hi Cadmus, hi Letiel!"

Cadmus blinked surprise and grumbled to himself in response to his cousin's arrival.

"Kaida. How are you doing?" Letiel greeted her warmly.

"Same old, same old," she answered, nodding.

Letiel leaned over the table, bringing her voice to a near whisper. "Any particular reason all these A teams are hanging out here?"

"Tournament."

"So early?" Cadmus mumbled, playing with his fork.

Kaida nodded. "I'm not sure why. It was announced yesterday. All participants need to be registered but otherwise there are no team regulations."

"None?" Letiel asked.

"None. Single pilots and teams up to however many you want are welcome. I mean obviously one can't hire an army but the average is four."

Letiel thought a minute. "With Celahir we can match the average." A tall 19-year-old slipped into the booth beside Letiel. "...speak of the devil."

"What did I miss?" Celahir asked.

"Nothing," Letiel asked. Her hands flashed a different message. *Already back from errands?*

I actually need to leave again, he answered. She nodded and got up.

Cadmus's hands flashed, *You've been gone forever. What's up?*

This tournament is throwing me off, Celahir answered, *something's not quite right.*

Returning from the counter Letiel dropped a handful of forms on the table. "Turns out only two cities are giving out these forms. That's why the café is so busy."

"Um, Letiel," Cadmus started handing out the forms. "You grabbed two extra."

The three looked at her questioningly as she started filling out the extra. "We four with our main zoids and two backups will be registered under the team name."

"Moonfell mystery pilots? I like it," Cadmus said with a grin.

Celahir whispered, "That's illegal. We have criminal records as is, if we're caught..."

"Relax, there's nothing on any of our records anymore," she assured him. His eyes widened and Celahir looked at Kaida who winked in confirmation.

"You're risking a lot more than just the team here. It will be really hard to move about legally..."

Cadmus interrupted, "The Backdraft has been pulling these strings for years. I think it's about time we gave them the taste of their own medicine."

“With clean records something as silly as ghost pilots will get a warning from the casual cop.”

“And the Guardian Force?” Celahir argued. Letiel ignored them all and kept filling out the forms. Celahir would cave. He always followed her.

She stood up, “Just to check: Letiel, Cadmus, Kaida, and Celahir. Our ghost members are Bronwen and Leilani.”

“You realize that if they run the records Bronwen will come up dead?” Celahir hissed.

“Yep.” Letiel tromped off and handed the papers back to the barkeeper. All they had left to do was wait.

It took two hours for the registration papers to go through, in that time checks would be run on the registered. If they were to be caught then the moment of truth would be in that time. If the team checked out their names were added to the registration board and automatically paired up with their first opponent. The match was scheduled and it was up to the teams to meet the appointment.

Letiel found their team name on the list and relaxed. “Seems we’ve been registered.”

The others looked up at the screen.

“There’s no way that could’ve worked,” Celahir mumbled to Letiel. She was staring at her drink. Her teammate was right of course. There was no way that should’ve worked.

“The Tiger Team,” Cadmus chuckled, “what kind of a name is that?”

Kaida smiled. “They’re lame pilots with lame zoids. Sabre Tigers will go down easy.”

“Don’t get cocky,” Letiel snapped. “All of us started low level and we did fine. There’s ALWAYS the possibility of these tigers pulling a fast one on us; especially if they’re working for Backdraft. There’s something strange about this tournament. All of us need to prepare carefully. Go tune up your zoids and make repairs.”

Cadmus yawned. “I guess, Bade HAS been jumpy. If anybody needs me I’ll be fighting imaginary zoids in the desert.”

He ducked under Letiel’s fist and ran out, chuckling at her mumbled curses as her fist collided with the wall. Kaida followed him, returning to her Stealth Dragon.

Someone needs to keep an eye on him! Flashed her hands.

“Zev has an appointment for an armament outfitting and I need to stop at the store,” Celahir announced. *Watch your back, there’s something seriously wrong with this tourney.*

I know.

Raithe and Melayney tend to be neutral we may be able to convince them to align with us. Just in case things go South.

I’ll see what I can do...

Letiel rubbed her throbbing knuckles and walked over to a booth in the corner. The shadowy pair, Raithe and Melayney, sat sipping their drinks and pouring over maps when the Moonfell leader pulled up a chair. The two looked up only briefly and then rolled up the maps.

“Am I missing something?” Letiel asked, keeping her voice low.

Melayney looked at Raithe then answered, “The tournament isn’t one to one. It’s a free for all.”

“And you know this how?”

“Do you not trust us?”

Letiel said nothing but noted Raithe’s hand in his jacket.

“Fine, I believe you.”

“You didn’t come here to ask us for information,” Raithe said, reading her features.

She chuckled, “Of course not. I want to make sure I can count on you.”

“When have we not been reliable?”

Melayney’s hand vanished beneath the table and Letiel involuntarily reached for her knife at her belt. A confrontation here was not the best of ideas but probably their only one. Raithe and his partner slowly relaxed as Letiel reluctantly brought both of her hands up to the table.

“I trust you,” she said, quietly. “You don’t have to fear the Moonfell in this competition.”

“You know our training grounds.”

“And you know mine.”

The pair stood up and left, leaving Letiel to pay the bill. She waited until she was sure they were gone before she scooped up the map they left behind. Under the table she unfolded the corner, smiling to herself when she confirmed its contents. Quietly, she tucked the map inside her jacket and stood up running into none other than Irvine.

Irvine was a well-known mercenary who was currently working with the Guardian Force. He piloted a Lightning Saix, one of the fastest zoids resembling a sleek, fanged fox. Irvine was tall, strong, and intimidating; especially with his eye patch. The patch itself was a series of lenses that

zoomed in and out for a better view of the distant. He wore a dark, sleeveless shirt with khaki colored cargo pants. Most importantly, he refused to move no matter how much she tried to push by; not that she expected him to.

“What’s the hurry?” he snickered. She glared at him, contemplating her chances of making it to the door. Unfortunately, he was faster, bigger, and (more or less) an officer.

“I’m not in the mood today,” she snapped.

“Is that the way you greet an old friend? Sit back down while we wait for Van,” he ordered. He put a hand on her shoulder, firmly, pushing her back down into her seat.

They weren’t friends. Not even close. Irvine was more of a rival than a friend but Van was a different story. Van was a good acquaintance, her own personal cop to run from. Like her, Van piloted a liger type zoid. His Blade Liger and her Slash Liger may have even been distant relatives and his organoid and hers were most likely distant relatives. Zeke and Pyrite were of similar design, nearly identical despite their color and Pyrite’s head spikes.

They didn’t have to wait long before Van came through the café doors. His dark eyes brightening as he saw them. He walked across the place to the booth and slipped in across from her. Letiel didn’t mind him quite as much. Van and she had both started out as kid pilots.

“It’s good to see you again Letiel,” he said.

“What am I under arrest for this time?”

He smiled briefly but his eyes were dark. “They know about the Moonfell’s origin. Your whole team is in danger. We need to take you to New Helic.”

The tension at the table was rising significantly but Letiel remained collected. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Irvine leaned forward, hissing, "You know exactly what we're talking about and you will come without difficulty."

"Who's 'they'?"

"You don't understand the situation," Van whispered. "I can't explain it to you right now."

Letiel frowned. "I have no desire to come with you."

"Letiel, I do not want to argue with you! Your country needs you; we stand at the brink of war. If you don't come with us then your friends may not be alive much longer," Van muttered.

"I don't believe you. No one in living history has captured a Moonfell pilot," she growled. Van sighed and fumbled around in his pocket, taking out a ring. The simple band of silver was roughly 1/8th of an inch wide. Tiny, etched Zoidian lettering snaked around it closely followed by the sideways moon symbol of Team Moonfell. The ring was sacred, given away very rarely to Moonfell leaders who for some reason or another resigned the Moonfell post. Twelve years ago was the last time the ring was given; the precious, prized possession that no owner would misplace.

Letiel felt the upper hand move to them and her heart sank at the sight of the ring on the table.

"Since when has the Republic sunk so low?! If any harm comes to my team, I'll kill you!" she snarled, slamming her fist on the table.

The whole café grew quiet, every eye turned in their direction while Letiel shook with rage. She was standing now, glaring at the pair, wishing them to go away and praying that this was all a mistake. One by one the pilots and customers went back to their betting and conversations, ignoring the three warriors.

"I suggest we take this outside," Irvine said. "We don't want more trouble than necessary."

Van nodded and stood up, snatching the ring and taking Letiel by the arm in the process. She reluctantly followed them, angrily looking for her opportunity to escape. The pair led her to her Slash Liger now flanked by Van's blue Blade Liger and Irvine's Lightning Saix.

A silver organoid ran to greet them, happily head butting Van.

"Heh, easy Zeke, it's just Letiel."

She snorted and started walking towards her zoid, pressing a small button on the inside of her bracelet behind her back. *How the hell did they catch Master Leilani in the first place?*

"Where do you think you're going?" Irvine snapped, grabbing her arm.

"Get your grimy claws off of me," she growled.

Behind the small group another organoid was creeping up. Pyrite was the same size as Zeke but far less friendly. His golden body sparkled as he ran at Irvine, bashing him away. With a spin Pyrite's thick tail slammed into Zeke and Van knocking them over while Letiel bolted to Kali, waking up the zoid and bolting for the city gates. Taking off, Pyrite followed.

The Slash Liger's custom paint reflected the dunes and hid

her from unwelcome eyes but the pilot, zoid, and organoid were far from safe. A blue radar popped up on the canopy eagerly trying to steal the pilot's attention, warning of the two pursuers. Letiel's eyes glanced over the screens as they popped up; weapons details, pilot status, Kali's status, core information, radar, and the back camera competing for attention. More cameras revealed the Saix and Liger slowly catching up in a classic pincer movement.

What do I do? She thought, *those two aren't going to just let me go.* Dashing between the dunes Kali showed her pilot the energy levels and stats on the newest attachment, ion boosters. Already pressing 200 kph and using the backpack booster unit, Kali was in no condition to increase her speed nor could Letiel handle speeds like that in this zoid, but the Saix could easily reach 325 kph and unless she beat that there was no chance of escape.

Letiel reluctantly turned on the new boosters and pushed a handle at her side forward. Kali leapt forward, slamming the pilot back into her seat as a warning screen popped up. Her speed was pushing 300 kph, a jump so dramatic that Letiel could feel her organs twisting and straining.

Sensing his owner's distress, Pyrite melted into a beam of light, hitting the liger and fusing with the core, adding his own power to that of the zoid. Gradually the system leveled out.

"Good job Pyrite," Letiel mumbled. She moved her weight from side to side, leaning on the pedals and moving between the dunes.

Another warning signal flashed, showing the terrain ahead; a rapidly approaching canyon. Letiel felt her heart sink as she checked her speed. At nearly 425 kph there was no chance of turning or changing directions.

"Pyrite," she mumbled, panting. "We need to open the

blades. Cut the ion boosters off... now."

The organoid roared his understanding and two pairs of handles opened from the dashboard. The side handle moved back to its original position as the boosters shut off. The liger's speed dropped dramatically and Letiel was thrown forward. Saved by her seatbelt she still tasted blood. The Saix was closing in just as a huge chasm opened up before them.

"Steady," she whispered between gasps.

Right at the edge the Slash Liger bent down and then leaped forward into the middle of the canyon. The pilot's hands flashed as she pulled out the handles, twisted them, and then pushed back in. With the blades now opened Letiel leaned back and pushed the boosters up to full strength. Kali's once rear facing blades, now extended, caught the air rising from the canyon, carrying the zoid across. The liger slammed into the ground, her right front leg buckling under the weight. Letiel only relaxed when the rolling Kali came to a stop.

Across the chasm the two guardian force zoids skidded to a halt, barely avoiding an accident.

Kali roared victory, climbing to her feet and slowly limped away.

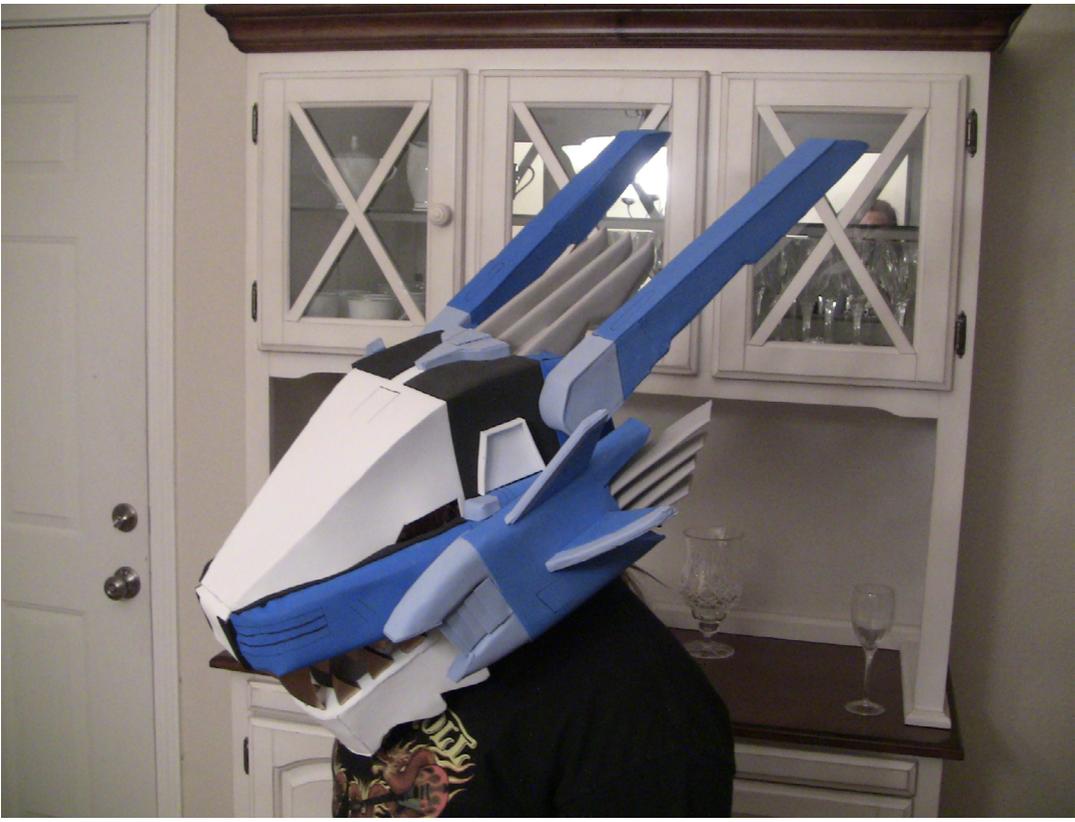
Liger Inuzuka



Liger Zero Lindsey



My Liger Zero cosplay was the first costume I had ever made. And for a first attempt, I am very proud of it. I have always wanted to make a cosplay for Zero and I was inspired by another cosplayer to do it. I was a major hit at Sakura Con 2010 in Seattle, WA. I was proud to be there supporting Zoids. I had so much fun and Zero was so successful at Sakura Con, I went to another con in Spokane WA called Otaku Con, where Liger Zero won first place in the costume contest. Liger Zero was difficult to make, it took on average around 4 months to complete. It was made out many materials. The armor was all foam board, the mask was plastic mesh covered in cushion foam then fun foam, and my boosters were foam board and made into a backpack. My Liger feet were claws I made and glued onto combat boots. I was very proud to make this cosplay and show that Zoids have not died; I was excited as to how many people knew what I was. I was, and still am proud of my Liger Zero cosplay and plan on continuing to cosplay Zoids doing a new Zoid every year. I would like to thanks everyone who supported my Zero Cosplay.



Ninja-Hobbit





Atonement

Speech Guide

"hello"- normal human speech

/hello/- Organoid speech

'hello'- Organoid thoughts

Ambient stood silently on the rocky edge of the canyon, his emerald eyes fixed to the soothing twinkling of the stars. He was trying to focus on the stars and ignore the dull ache in his chest that was eating away at him. The strange pain had been plaguing him for years, and always seemed to get worse after he did something 'bad' or after watching Hiltz do something he would deem evil. Regret? Remorse? Those feelings held no meaning to the crimson Organoid; he was hardened by battle and unaffected by such petty emotions... or so he told himself.

He sighed and lowered his gaze from the stars, his body drooping visibly, a quiet growl rumbling from deep within his throat. *'What is this ache within me? Why does it not cease?'* he thought in frustration, clutching at his chest with a clawed hand. Ambient growled and lifted his gaze to the stars again, his shimmering emerald eyes focusing on one particular bright blue star; the Star of Eve. *'Mother Eve... why would you let your child endure this pain for so long? Why do you not help me?!'* he thought in despair, whining softly.

Silent seconds slipped by, Ambient remaining unmoving with his eyes on the Star of Eve. The star shimmered for a moment, making the Organoid blink, before it returned to its normal radiance. Ambient sighed and tore his gaze from the stars, knowing such pleas would go unanswered. He turned his head away from the once comforting stars, his head and gaze lowered. His long sweeping tail slowly rocked from side to side, the deadly spines that armed the tip motionless and lowered.

Thoughts swirled in his head but Ambient tried his best to ignore them. He did not want to think of the death and destruction he had witnessed earlier as he had watched Hiltz decimate New Helic City and the brave few who tried to stop him. Even though he had left early- Hiltz was *still* destroying the city- he had seen horrific and mortifying things, things that were currently vying for his attention. But despite his best efforts one particular image flashed into his mind, and it made him fall motionless. It was of Raven and Reese, when the two pilots had fallen against the mighty Death Stinger, standing and waiting for their deaths. Ambient had never seen Raven surrender, but he had today; he didn't try to fight or escape after his Zoid fell, he accepted his fate. Ambient had been watching from one of the destroyed buildings, and somehow Raven had seen or sensed him, for the young pilot had looked right at him. His eyes; the hurt and hopelessness, the emptiness and misery, had pierced the Organoid like an arrow. The human's spirit had been completely broken by the loss of Shadow; it was as if the teen's very soul had died with his Organoid. Seeing him like that, in that broken, hopeless state, had affected Ambient in a way he had never experienced before.

Ambient shook his head and snorted, trying to get the image out of his head, but it persisted. *'Why will it not vanish? Raven and Reese are both dead, so why is this image haunting me?'* he thought in anger, shaking his head furiously and snarling loudly. The ache inside him grew suddenly worse; the sharp throbs of pain making him grimace and roar. The image of Raven refused to leave his thoughts, its presence seeming to make the pangs worse.

/Stop it!!/ the crimson Organoid howled in agony, grasping at his head with his talons. He whipped around frantically, snarling and gnashing his teeth in anger and pain as the ache grew worse and worse. */Make it stop!!/* he screamed to the stars, falling to his knees, scratching at his chest plates in a vain attempt to reach the source of the pain. Then, just as

suddenly as the pain began, it stopped, leaving Ambient on his knees, his body shaking and eyes wide. He was breathing heavily, his chest heaving with every gasp, shudders racking his body.

'What is happening to me? What could be causing pain this intense?' Ambient thought frantically, shakily getting to his feet and looking upwards. He looked to the stars for some sort of answer, but like every time before, no answer came.

/Mother Eve... why have you abandoned me?!/ Ambient cried in frustration, roaring to the Star of Eve. He roared and howled like a wolf to the moon, hoping for some sort of response from the star. But no reassurance came to the Organoid from the Zoid Eve; Ambient truly believed Mother Eve had abandoned him. Ambient called a last time to the Star of Eve and fell to his clawed hands and knees, feeling completely alone on the empty cliff; his only company the cold night wind.

/It was not my fault, Mother Eve... it was not my fault.../ he whimpered, squeezing his eyes shut and bowing his head. */It was not my fault... it was Hiltz's fault.../* he repeated, twisting his face into a snarl, */... he turned me into this monster... he stole my innocence and honor... why did you not save me, Mother Eve?!* He snatched me from your comforting arms... he turned your angel into a twisted demon!! *Why did you let him do it?!/* he screamed to the moons, unfurling his glowing feathery wings, */... how could you let one of your own children be turned into a monster such as I?! How could you let him kill the angel you birthed of your own love and resurrect me as the cruel demon I am now?! What kind of mother just watches her child be beaten and tortured and abused, and does nothing to stop it?! Why did you not rescue me, Mother Eve?!* he cried, lifting his head and staring at the Star of Eve.

Ambient roared sadly and weakly fanned his angelic wings, feeling an unbearable weakness and hopelessness spread

through him. *'She's abandoned me... she's left her child to die at the hands of a monster...'* he thought sadly, tearing his gaze from the Star of Eve and getting to his feet, turning his back to the only source of compassion he'd ever known. *'Mother Eve has abandoned me... because I am no longer the child she created, but I am the demon Hiltz crafted of his hatred and spite... ... a being of darkness that can never return to the soothing light of Eve...'* he thought, closing his eyes and sighing sadly.

The sound of an approaching Zoid brought Ambient back to reality, the crimson Organoid shaking his head and snorting. He lifted his head and narrowed his glowing eyes, and within a moment recognized the unmistakable form of the Death Stinger. Ambient growled deep in his throat and narrowed his eyes, deactivating his energy wings as the scorpion Zoid drew closer.

"Ambient, success! The Republic capital has fallen!!" Hiltz yelled in triumph, the Death Stinger snapping its pincers in show, "The Republic has been crippled and its forces all but destroyed; it will not survive to see another sunrise, Ambient!! I have discovered the location of their 'secret weapon'; all of the remaining forces have gathered there, and I will destroy them all in one fell swoop!!"

/Finally we will be rid of our enemies.../ Ambient growled, feigning excitement so not to anger his master.

"Yes, soon the whole of Zi will be mine!!" Hiltz said slyly, smirking in a dark manner, "But first, I have a task for you, Ambient..." he added, his smirk broadening.

/What is my task, master?/ Ambient asked, not knowing what Hiltz had in mind.

"Well... I'm almost positive I completely destroyed the capitol, but I'd like to be sure. I want you to go back to New Helic City and look for any survivors, Zoid or human, and if you find any, kill them." He said, his emotionless ebony eyes

narrowing seriously.

/It will be done, master.../ Ambient nodded, his wings materializing in the thin desert air.

"Oh, and Ambient, take this..." Hiltz said suddenly, opening the cockpit of the Death Stinger and tossing a dark colored object, a canteen, towards the crimson Organoid, "There are fires probably still burning in the city and I'm sure the air is still hot from the Charged Particle Beam, so you'll want to keep your internal temperature in check. You don't want to end up like that fool Raven's Organoid." Ambient nodded in agreement and snatched the canteen from the sand, holding it carefully in his razored talons. He bowed his head and closed his eyes, a crimson glow enveloping his body as he transformed. Ambient's eyes flashed open and he launched into the air, blazing off in the direction of the fallen capital.

'Check for survivors? I watched him melt half the city with my very eyes; no one could have survived that...' Ambient thought, thinking his task idiotic, but he knew better than to question Hiltz.

Flying at such an advanced speed, Ambient reached the destroyed capital in mere minutes. Slowing down, the crimson light surrounding his body dissipated as he transformed back into his normal form, soaring on his wings of light. His eyes widened as he realized the full extent of the destruction. There wasn't a building within sight that hadn't received some sort of severe damage, though most of the structures had been vaporized or pulverized by the immense heat and power of the Charged Particle Beam. A thick blanket of ash and soot covered the ground as far as his eyes could see, looking almost like dirty snow. Spires of steel and concrete stood like a skeleton in the shattered remains of the city, surrounded by the mutilated bodies of unrecognizable Zoids.

/Hiltz is a fool... no one is alive in this wasteland.../

Ambient thought, hovering in the air like a hummingbird as he stared at the surreal landscape. He fanned his wings and landed gracefully on the top of a leaning building, perching on the sloped top like a vulture looking for prey. His feathered wings dissolved in a flash of light, Ambient gripping the roof tightly with his powerful talons, the crimson Organoid scanning the desolate landscape with his emerald eyes for any survivors.

A wave of heat washed over Ambient's body, making him turn away from the depressing landscape in search of its source. A massive fire was eating away at the buildings farther away, the few that had survived the initial blast, heat billowing from the hungry flames like the burning breath of an angry dragon. The size and intensity of the blaze concerned the Organoid, but not enough for him to abandon his vigil.

Even though a good amount of time had passed since the attack ended, debris was still returning to the ground, littering the decimated city with layers of dust and cinders. Soft, pale ashes drifted from the smoke-choked skies, almost like a morbid snow, coating the city in a ghostly pallor. Black soot clung to the heat-smoothed concrete, some of the cinders still burning in the dark, giving the broken city a hellish appearance. Death seemed to hang in the air, giving the hot, thick atmosphere an even darker feel.

Ambient growled and shook his head and body, knocking the ash that had accumulated on his body free, the soft fluff falling from his smooth armor. The pale gray ash seemed to fall from the sky endlessly, quickly recovering Ambient in a snow-like layer. He snorted and shook himself again, the strange material greatly annoying the crimson Organoid.

A sudden movement on the ground below caught Ambient's attention, drawing his focus away from the falling ash. His emerald eyes scanned for the source of whatever had moved, expecting to see a dying Zoid or fallen piece of

debris. But even with his sensitive vision, he was having a hard time locating whatever was moving on the ash-covered ground. A sapphire flash against the pale gray ashes caught the Organoid's eye, Ambient zeroing in on the source. His emerald eyes narrowed in confusion as he identified the source of the movement, a bluebird, thrashing on the debris-strewn ground.

'How could a bluebird survive the attack? It should have been incinerated in the blast...' Ambient thought, leaning forward slightly to get a better look at the small bird. The jay appeared to be injured or tangled in something, the songbird crying and flapping furiously. Ambient slung the strapped canteen over his armored shoulder, his gleaming eyes still focused on the feathered creature. His lighted wings materialized in the heated air, bright beacons of light in the darkened atmosphere.

Ambient released his grip on the building, completely unfurling his energetic wings, gliding on the hot winds created by the fires. He circled over the space the jay occupied; making sure the ground was safe for him to land. Nothing seemed too dangerous to the crimson Organoid, Ambient slowing and lowering towards the ground. The bird began to panic and screech as he landed; Ambient's clawed feet sinking deep into the thick blanket of ash. Ambient deactivated his wings and leaned down to the small creature, looking at the tiny bird oddly. It stopped thrashing and stared at him with pupil-less, liquid onyx eyes, wide with a wild fear. Its tiny body was trembling in terror, its small chest heaving as it breathed heavily, its bright sapphire plumage singed from the heat and blacked by soot.

The Organoid's eyes drifted down the small creature's body, coming to rest on one of its thin legs. A wire had somehow wrapped itself around it, the thin piece of metal cutting into the songbird's fragile leg. Ambient cocked his head and blinked his glowing eyes, staring at the hopeless bird, a

strange feeling building inside him.

Before he could stop himself Ambient reached out towards the small creature, carefully clasping his talons around the injured bird. The jay screeched as soon as he lifted it from the ground, weakly beating its wings in a feeble attempt to escape his grasp. Ambient tightened his grip slightly, making the bird cease its struggling; the helpless creature making soft, sad chirping noises. The crimson Organoid looked down at the wire that connected the bird to the earth, knowing that the bird would die within a day if left bound. Ambient growled softly and, without releasing the bird, cut the thin wire with his dewclaw, severing the bird's tie to the ground. Again using his dewclaw he carefully loosened the loop around the bird's leg, flicking it off, completely freeing the small creature.

Ambient stopped for a moment, just feeling the softly feathered bird clutched within his claws. He could feel its little heart beating rapidly in its small chest; the tiny bird squirming slightly and chirping quietly. The crimson Organoid had never really *felt* a living creature before, the beating of a heart or the delicate bones; it seemed truly amazing to Ambient that these organic beings could survive at all with their frail structure and soft flesh; they were so vulnerable and defenseless against Eve's children, like himself. Why, he could crush the tiny jay as easily as he could an egg; even a half-hearted flick of his claw could cut the bird fatally, but his mind wasn't on murder as he looked at his clasped hands. He could just see the helpless creature trapped between his talons, the songbird struggling slightly as it tried to determine what had happened to it.

Then, Ambient did something completely against every instinct Hiltz had drilled into him- he opened his hands. The little bird lay in his hands for a moment or two, its eyes squeezed shut with fear and tiny body quaking. It cracked open a coal-black eye and blinked, lifting its head and

glancing around. Shakily it got to its feet, ruffling its brilliant plumage and fanning its short, full wings. As soon as it relaxed its feathers it stretched its newly freed leg, looking down at it and cocking its head curiously. The little bird lifted its head and looked at Ambient, blinking its glittering eyes before fluttering up from his hands, circling his head a few times, before it winged off behind him with a pleasant chirp.

Ambient turned and followed the little bluebird with his eyes, watching its form grow smaller and smaller as it flew away. *'At least something survived... but Hiltz doesn't need to know, after all, he said to look for Zoids and Organoids, not birds...'* he thought, blinking his glistening emerald eyes as the small bird disappeared into the smoky sky. He stood there for a moment, just staring into the sky, his crimson body reflecting the eerie light of the raging fires.

For some odd reason Ambient's eyes suddenly cut downward, something seeming to... call him. Ambient narrowed his eyes and started walking; not knowing what he was doing or where he was going, just following his instincts. *'I... I think I sense something alive... something bigger than that bluebird... a human, perhaps?'* he pondered, flicking his spined tail-tip at the thought, *'Maybe I will finally get to kill something today... .. I think the feeling of some warm blood running down my muzzle and hearing a few screams will help keep my mind off this ache...'* he thought, a dark smirk tugging at the edge of his lips as he flexed his deadly spines. He could indeed still feel the dull ache deep in his chest, but the thoughts of killing helped distract him away from the ever-present pain. Even though Hiltz had not completely twisted Ambient, most of his mind had been distorted with violence and killing by the Zoidian.

Ambient walked through the thick layer of ash, the pale fluff springy and soft beneath his feet. It was akin to deep snow, though the heavy Organoid didn't sink in as far due to its almost spongy resilience. The layer was at least a yard deep,

completely covering the ground and muffling the otherwise loud footsteps of the crimson Organoid. Ambient was beginning to like the blanket of ash; the pale gray coloration made anything on the surface stand out, giving him an advantage to spot any potential 'prey' faster and make sure he wasn't seen too early.

The Organoid noticed a growing number of Zoids near him, the dead machines silent and still, covered in the pale ash. Their melted and twisted bodies were bent and mangled, their eyes wide in pure fear and pain. The Zoids' haunting presence didn't bother Ambient in the slightest, he was used to being around death and destruction, and this was no different than any other time. He kept his eyes focused ahead, trying to keep from looking at the carnage and scanning for the source of the strange feeling urging him on.

He stopped for a moment and glanced around at the few buildings that surrounded him, trying to get a feel about where in the city he was. The large business buildings looked familiar to him, and he began to wonder just where he was exactly. Something about his surroundings made him feel... strange, like he was returning to a place where he had committed some wrong. The ache inside him started to throb, almost like the beating of the blue songbird's heart. Ambient greatly detested the feeling; it made him feel like he was one of the weak organic creatures and not a proud child of Eve.

Ambient continued walking through the destroyed city, his only company the hot swirling winds in the deserted, empty city. *'Whatever I'm sensing must be nearby... I should be seeing it soon...'* he thought, smirking darkly as he thought of happening across an unfortunate survivor. Ambient shook his head and blinked his eyes, stopping as he came across a barrier- a gored, burned and dismembered Command Wolf. The once white Zoid was charred and blackened, its metal body warped and partly melted, its Core showing in its torn-open belly. The Wolf Zoid had stood no chance against the

Death Stinger.

With a quiet growl, Ambient leapt up onto the downed Zoid, landing gracefully on its shoulder without as much as a sound. He hopped onto its back without much effort, shaking himself of dust and soot, looking over the Pulse Laser at what lay behind the downed Republican Zoid. A strange cloud of dust or haze obscured his vision as the wind shifted, showering him in hot embers from a distant blaze. He waited patiently for the fog of dust to lift; curious to see what lay hidden behind the veil of soot and ash. The winds shifted again and the ash settled, the air clearing, revealing...

/Dear Eve.../ Ambient muttered in shock, seeing the destroyed bodies of the Geno Breaker and Psycho Geno Saurer, lying motionless on the ash-covered ground, surrounded by the shattered remains of countless buildings. Ambient stood motionless in disbelief, not understanding how the two Zoids had managed to withstand the Charged Particle Beam without being obliterated. Both Zoids were in a deplorable state, but amazing Ambient could still hear their voices, whimpering and whining in agony.

The Geno Breaker was laying awkwardly on its right side, a deep puncture in its side, where the Death Stinger had stabbed it. It was coated in a layer of dust and ash, its body still and eyes dim; it was about to die. Alongside it was the once-beautiful Psycho Geno Saurer, and it was in even worse condition. The Zoid was collapsed on its belly, its brilliant colored armor blackened and peeling; an effect of the intense heat of the blast. Its sapphire eyes were flickering between life and death, the Zoid in its last minutes of life. The poor Zoid's chest was blown open, exposing the dying Core, the pale blue light of the orb growing dim with every passing second.

Ambient was in shock, not believing he was seeing both the Psycho Geno Saurer and the Geno Breaker *alive*. As he looked at the dying Zoids, a stray thought crossed his mind, but he quickly dismissed the idea as outlandish. *'There is no*

way Raven and Reese could have survived... they were standing right there; the blast surely killed them both...' he told himself, knowing there was no possible way that the pair could have made it through the Beam. Ambient found the Zoids' survival very perplexing, however, and his natural curiosity pressed him to go and investigate.

He jumped down off of the dead Command Wolf, landing heavily but quietly, the spongy layer of ash absorbing the force of the fall. The deep layer of downy ash muffled the clanking of his feet as he took a few steps closer, Ambient scanning the undisturbed surface of the gray coating for any sort of threat or danger. Nothing sharp or glowing was protruding from the ashen blanket, so he figured he was safe as he began plodding towards the half-dead Zoids.

The crimson Organoid could feel buried debris as he walked over the layer of ash and dust, his feet sinking deep enough to reach them. The sudden, sharp clangs of his claws banging against metal and glass seemed deafening to the Organoid, making him feel exposed, like a black wolf in a snowy clearing. He could sense the unmistakable warmth of a mammalian mind, but where it was coming from he couldn't determine. It was near, he knew that much, according to his senses he was right on top of it...

Ambient took another step forward, his foot once again sinking into the ash, expecting to feel hard steel beneath his foot. But instead of metal, his claws touched something soft, something that wasn't ash, something that *moved*. Ambient instantly stopped, frozen in mid-stride, his foot resting on the buried object, his thoughts racing at what could be lying below him. Whatever the thing was wasn't moving very much, only rising and fall slightly, almost as if it was *breathing*.

'*What on Zi...?*' Ambient thought to himself, still frozen in place with his foot resting on the strange object. His curiosity was urging him to explore what was hidden beneath the dust,

and his hunting instincts were beginning to surface, telling him to kill. Ambient's glowing eyes were focused on the ground before him, looking for any movement and listening for any noise; anything that could tell him what was below the surface.

He pushed his foot down lightly, his claws pressing into the buried object, trying to figure out what it was. Ambient stared in fascination as the ash in front of him twitched very slightly, something *moving* beneath the blanket of soot. He now knew that whatever was buried was somehow *alive*, and the impulse to kill began to grow stronger inside him. He wanted so badly to just duck down and snap his jaws shut on the hidden thing, but oddly he found himself resisting the urge, which greatly confused and surprised him.

A weak, muffled noise came from beneath the ash, intriguing the crimson Organoid. Ambient withdrew his foot and stood over whatever was buried, leaning down slightly, narrowing his gleaming eyes as he pondered what he would find. He sniffed the soot like a hunting wolf before he pushed his nose down into the ash, rooting down into the downy fluff in search of the thing.

His snout touched something soft, making Ambient instantly stop, his nose pressed against the strange object. Whatever it was moved; it was almost as if it was shying away from his touch. '*Something alive... something to kill...*' Ambient concluded, a grim smirk crossing his muzzle. He snorted and lifted his head, shifting his weight, flexing his claws and flicking his tail in anticipation. He growled and tore into the blanket of ash, ripping into the covering with his powerful claws, determined to find what lay buried. A soft cry of pain made him stop, suddenly and strangely concerned that he was *hurting* whatever was hidden. He snorted and shook his head, and instead used his feathery wings to blow away the ash from the buried thing, effectively removing the obscuring blanket to reveal- Ambient's eyes widened in shock and his

body froze, for he was standing over...

/Raven.../ he growled quietly, looking down at the young human in amazement. The ebony-haired boy was on his side, his eyes closed and body still, not reacting to him at all. He was barely breathing, his breath slow and weak, choking on the soot and dust. The downy ash clung to his side; where a dark smear of crimson shone against the ghastly pallor of his clothing, coming from a slash across his ribs; from Ambient's own razored talons. He looked dead, but Ambient could see and hear him breathing, but it was growing weaker, and the realization dawned on him...

/He... he's *dying*.../ Ambient said softly, strange feelings filling him... worry, and *fear*. He stood over the unconscious boy, unmoving and silent, his thoughts racing as to what he was going to do. The sight and smell of the fresh blood triggered his instincts to kill, urging him to finish off the helpless human. He snarled and shook his head, trying to resist the urge to tear into the boy, oddly not wanting to hurt him. 'No... stop...' he thought vainly, turning away from Raven and growling loudly, and mercifully the desire to kill him faded away.

As the red Organoid was preoccupied with his out of control instincts, Raven moved and groaned, some of his sense starting to return. Ambient heard him try to take a deep breath, but start to cough violently, something wrong with his lungs. Ambient turned back to him and snorted, plodding over to him and leaning down. He cocked his head and looked at Raven, knowing the boy was dying, but unsure of what to do. He growled quietly and bent down closer, sniffing his body curiously, search for any signs of deterioration in his condition.

Raven winced and curled up slightly, his body shaking, a weak cry of pain escaping him as blood continued to bubble up from the slash on his side. Ambient blinked and looked at the human oddly; he had never seen Raven like this, it was

just strange to see the fearless pilot whimpering and shaking like a frightened child. '*Something is wrong with him... the slash from my claw isn't his only injury; that one cut couldn't possibly be causing this much pain...*' he thought, knowing something had to be seriously wrong with the human.

Ambient leaned closer and sniffed Raven's face, smelling for blood on his breath, which would mean internal bleeding. His fears were realized; he could smell blood, and a lot of it. '*Either he has another wound I can't see, or he has serious internal bleeding...*' he thought, knowing he likely was going to watch Raven die. He sighed loudly, looking down at Raven, not knowing what to do.

Raven shivered and his eyelids fluttered open with a weak moan, looking up at Ambient with clouded eyes. He blinked slowly and stared at him blankly, a distant, empty look in his clouded amethystine eyes. Ambient could see the pain and suffering in the boy's eyes, and for some reason, it *hurt* him. Raven closed his eyes and curled up tighter in a vain attempt to protect himself but he only succeeded in worsening the slash, a soft whine of pain coming from him as the blood continued to paint his ashen clothes a morbid crimson.

"A... Am-bi..." Raven stuttered quietly, too weak to even open his eyes again, his body still shaking. Ambient blinked his glowing eyes and growled, watching Raven grow weaker and weaker, at war with himself over whether to leave him to die or *do* something. He shifted his weight uneasily and he felt the canteen bump against his side, and a thought struck him. He slung the canteen from his shoulder and grasped it in his claws, unscrewing the cap.

Ambient poured a little of the water out onto his claws, the cool, clean water seeming to sparkle in the pulsing light of the countless fires. He took a step closer to Raven and held his talons over his head, letting the water drip down his claw onto the boy's lips. Raven instinctively opened his mouth when he felt the moisture, allowing Ambient to drip the

water directly into his mouth. The crimson Organoid poured more water onto his claws and dripped it into the injured pilot's mouth, knowing the boy would choke if he tried to let him drink from the canteen on his own. This way he could get water without the danger of choking on it.

Raven swallowed as soon as Ambient stopped, coughing slightly before his shaking continued. Ambient couldn't help but feel sympathetic, seeing the pilot so helpless and weak, but he didn't know what to do. The fires were closing in fast; there wasn't much time before the fires reached the two dying Zoids and Raven.

Ambient stood up and capped the canteen, looking over at the Psycho Geno Saurer. The Zoid's Core had extinguished; it was truly dead. A cold gray was beginning to appear on its once beautiful body, the stone of death slowly creeping over its shattered body. The Geno Breaker was slowly approaching death as well; it had very little time left. Ambient sighed as he looked at the crimson Zoid, his eyes drifting downward to Raven at his feet. The boy had managed to roll onto his back, but he was still lapsing in and out of consciousness; his breathing was ragged and labored, but it sounded marginally better because of the water.

"R-Re..." Raven muttered softly, catching Ambient's attention. He leaned down and growled quietly, knowing what he was trying to say. *'He's worried about Reese... where is Re-?'* he didn't get to finish his thought, for a sapphire blur tackled him away from the half-dead boy, making him roar in shock. He quickly regained his composure and whipped around, and unsurprisingly found Specula standing protectively over the young pilot, hissing loudly.

/Get away Ambient!!/ Specula snarled threateningly, though her voice was weak from pain, /Haven't you caused enough death and despair today?!/ Ambient recoiled slightly, but met her piercing gaze.

/I have done nothing here, Specula, Hiltz is responsible for the death here, not me.../ Ambient growled, standing up confidently, /... I was only trying to... *help* Raven.../ he forced out, the word leaving a foul taste in his mouth.

/Help? *Help*?! You were trying to kill him!! You are incapable of helping anything!!/ Specula spat, narrowing her golden eyes, baring her silver teeth in a feral snarl.

/I was trying to give him water, Specula, not kill him.../ Ambient defended, /... even you know I am not a savage killer deep down, we were both born from the same mother, Mother Eve, so you are no different from me than I am you, or Shadow, or Zeke.../

/Shut up Ambient!!/ Specula snapped, /I am *nothing* like you!!/ Ambient sighed quietly and looked down at Raven, knowing he would never be able to convince Specula of his intentions. *'He will die if I leave him, Specula doesn't know what to do... I have to do something...'* he thought, his eyes not leaving the dying pilot.

/Specula, can you not see Raven is dying?/ Ambient asked, looking at the female with his glittering emerald eyes, /... he will not make it another sunrise unless you let me help him.../

/You cannot help him, Ambient, you just want to kill him!!/ Specula roared, lowering her head and showing her horns threateningly.

/If I wanted to kill him, Specula, why did I not kill him when I first found him?/ Ambient shot back, trying to defend himself. Specula opened her mouth to respond, but shut it, the realization of his words sinking in. /Go ahead, search my thoughts if you think I am lying, but I assure you, I meant no harm to the boy.../

/You... you are telling the truth.../ Specula whispered, her

eyes widening slightly, / ... but... *why?* /

/I wish I knew the answer myself, sister, but even I do not know why I want to help him... / Ambient answered quietly, walking over to Specula and Raven. Specula hissed quietly but stepped away, letting him get to Raven. Ambient nodded at her and looked down at the boy, a quiet sigh escaping him as he tried to determine what to do with him.

A sudden wave of heat made him turn his head to the right, and his eyes widened when he realized the fires were much closer than he had thought. He only had a few minutes before the inferno reached them; only a few minutes to escape. He tore his gaze from the massive fire and looked down at Raven, knowing he would die unless he did something *now*.

/Specula, the fires are closing in/ Ambient warned, standing over Raven to shield him from the hot, drifting embers. Specula nodded and looked at the raging fire, a hint of fear in her molten eyes.

/What do you want me to do, Ambient?/ she asked calmly, cocking her head slightly and growling quietly.

/Fix the Geno Breaker enough for it to walk; you are a better healer than I/ Ambient ordered gently, before looking down at the injured pilot at his feet, /I will get Raven, just hurry and get the Geno Breaker operational or we are all dead... / Specula nodded and transformed, launching into the Geno Breaker to begin the healing process. Ambient looked down at Raven again, sighing and slouching his shoulders as he looked at the boy.

Raven moved slightly and cracked open his eyes, blinking and looking up at him. Ambient growled softly and leaned down to him, his emerald eyes meeting his violet ones, the pain once again visible. To Ambient's surprise, Raven didn't panic or start to struggle or fight, almost as if he knew he wasn't going to hurt him. *'Good... this will make things a lot*

easier...' Ambient thought, sighing quietly, but another blast of searing air reminded him of the urgency of the situation.

Ambient growled softly and walked behind Raven, leaning down and lightly grasping his shoulders. He slowly started to drag him towards the Geno Breaker, not wanting to lift him for fear of aggravating any internal injuries. Raven struggled only once, obviously not enjoying having Ambient drag him, but he didn't fight against his grip. *'Hmm... this is unexpected...'* Ambient thought, *'... I would have expected Raven to be kicking and screaming... but I'm not complaining... it's not like I want him to be fighting...'*

The crimson Organoid carefully dragged the ebony-haired pilot next to the cockpit of the Geno Breaker, releasing Raven as he turned to look up at the ruby Zoid. Its armor had repaired and one of the missing claw-arms had regenerated, but it still was in a sorry state. As if responding to his thoughts, Specula erupted from the Geno Breaker's Core with an exhausted roar, landing heavily next to the crimson Organoid, falling to the ash with a fatigued sigh.

/Specula... good work. The Geno Breaker should be able to make it far enough away to be safe... / Ambient said, helping the sapphire Organoid to her feet, /... but make haste, the fires are advancing quickly, we do not have much time before they reach us... / he said on a more serious note, approaching the Breaker's cockpit.

The Geno Breaker sensed his presence and opened the cockpit, the dimly lit space black and forbidding. Ambient turned and carefully lifted Raven in his arms and jumped up into the cockpit, hearing the roaring of the fire growing stronger and louder. He stopped for a moment, the same strange sensation that he received when holding the bluebird washing through him. He could feel Raven's heart beating weakly and the rising and falling of his chest as he breathed, the boy barely conscious in his claws. As Ambient held him, he noticed the strange pain inside him, it began to *change*.

He could feel the throbbing pain begin to synch to Raven's heartbeat, making him feel as though he had a heart of his own buried within his chest. Ambient growled and shook his head, trying to ignore the pain within him and focus again at the task at hand.

Raven moaned weakly as Ambient placed him in the pilot's seat, his eyes opening slightly as the crimson Organoid strapped him in. Ambient made a soft purr and met his gaze, making sure the pilot was comfortable and that his wounds weren't upset. He appeared fine to the Organoid, and he turned away from him to leap out. Just before he jumped out, however, he felt a weak tug on one of the spines that armed the tip of his tail, making him turn. Raven had a feeble hold on the razor-sharp spine, his hand shaking and strength weak.

"Am... Am-bient..." the ebony-haired Imperial wheezed, his voice weak and fading, "... t-th... t-hank... y-you..." he breathed, his soft voice barely heard over the roaring flames. Ambient blinked his glowing eyes in surprise, never expecting the boy to *thank* him after all he had done to him in the past. His gaze met Raven's, and he could see the relief, and he noticed the pain in his eyes had faded. He blinked again and recovered enough to nod in understanding, before he leapt down out of the cockpit. The Geno Breaker closed the cover and staggered to its feet under its own power and will, growling sadly when it saw the now-ossified Psycho Geno Saurer lying a few yards away.

/Specula, can you control the Breaker enough to pilot it somewhere safe?/ Ambient asked his female counterpart, turning to look at her. Specula nodded and looked up at the wounded Zoid, a quiet sigh escaping her.

/It won't be easy, but I can do it.../ she said quietly, /... anything to ensure my mistress remains safe.../ she whispered, laying a clawed hand lightly on her chest-plates, where Ambient assumed Reese was tucked away.

/Hurry and get yourselves out of here; Hiltz may still return and Raven and Reese, and the Geno Breaker, are in no condition to fight the Death Stinger. Hurry and go.../ Ambient said, nosing her lightly, urging her on. Specula nodded and transformed, fusing to the Breaker's Core. The mighty Zoid let out a deafening bellow and fired its boosters, rocketing away from the destroyed city. Ambient spread his own angelic wings and rode a thermal up and away from the ground, hovering in the air.

Not three minutes after the Breaker had vanished the fires reached and engulfed the body of the Psycho Geno Saurer, destroying the buildings that had surrounded Raven and the Geno Breaker. The heat from the fire was nearly unbearable, but Ambient showed no sign of discomfort as he skimmed the top of the flames, turning and winging off in the direction he had remembered Hiltz taking. *'Why did I save Raven and the Geno Breaker? Why did I not kill him? He was helpless at my feet, and I helped him... has Mother Eve finally answered my prayers? Or was that of my own doing?'* countless questions swirled in his head, none of which he could supply an answer for. He shook his head and beat his feathery wings, trying to focus on flying as he left the desolate ruins of New Helic City behind him.

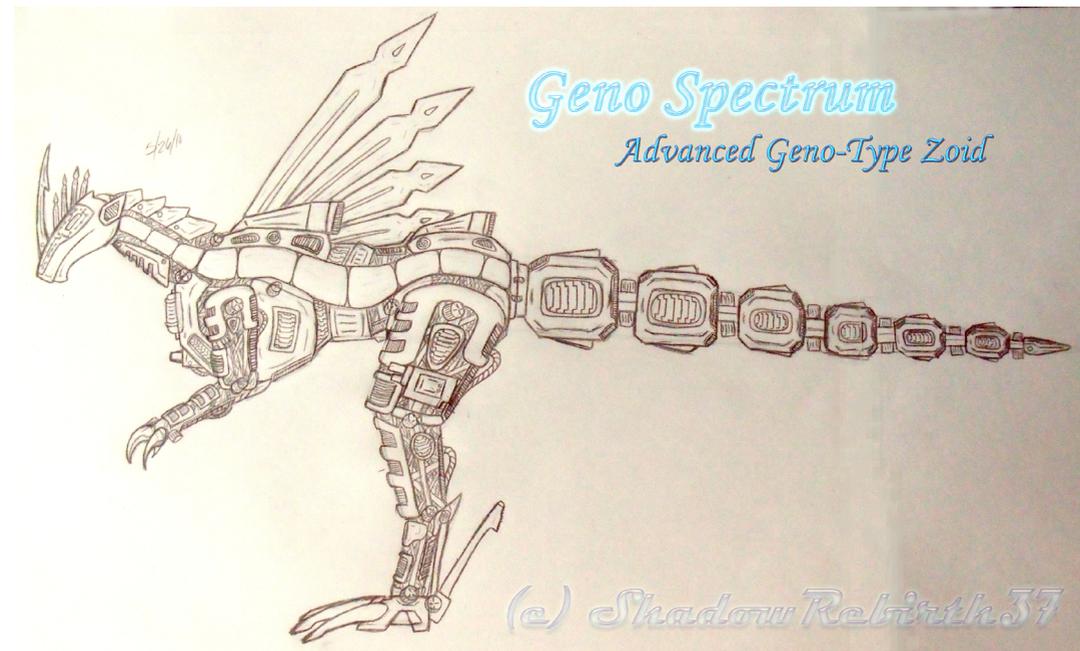
As Ambient flew, he began to grow more aware of the throbbing in his chest. He could sense the beating within his chest, but it began to change as he focused on it. The heart-like rhythm began to grow faint as he soared through the starry sky, fading away until... the pain was *gone*. Ambient felt a strange mix of joy and freedom fill him, as if he was suddenly free of a burden he had carried for years. He felt light and energized, and he roared in happiness as he acrobatically spun in the calm desert winds.

/At last!!/ Ambient cried in delight, /At last I am free of this pain!!/ he roared to the heavens, weaving and diving in the cool air, feeling as free as the bluebird he had returned to

the skies. He had never felt so alive; he felt as if he had been reborn in Eve's light. The pain had left him and the weight of the countless sins he had committed no longer pressed down on his conscience; he felt as if he had never done anything evil in his life. He felt... free... free from Hiltz's twisted ways.

'I have redeemed myself of the evils of my past... I have cleansed my soul and conscience from Hiltz's malice... never again will I hurt another innocent heart! I will never return to being Hiltz's demon... but return to being Eve's seraph!!' Ambient thought proudly, roaring out in triumph across the sleepy desert. He twisted his body in an aerobatic display of pleasure and freedom, trilling his bliss to the twinkling skies above and the silent sands below.

'At last I have found... atonement...'



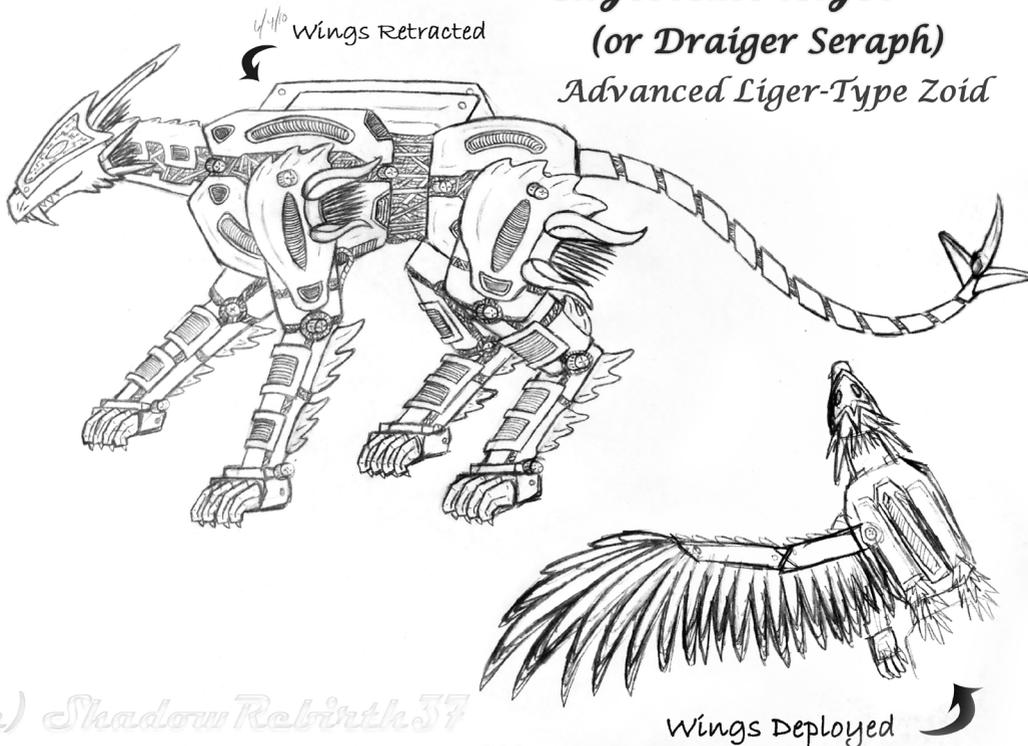
□



Traiger Saosin
Advanced Liger/Geno Hybrid

Wings Deployed

Engelbreine Liger
(or Draiger Seraph)
Advanced Liger-Type Zoid



Wings Retracted

Wings Deployed

Stars

Speech Guide

"hello"- normal human speech

/hello/- Organoid speech

'hello'- Organoid thoughts

Shadow gazed at the starry sky, his unblinking sapphire eyes drifting from star to star. Raven was standing motionlessly before him, staring silently at the glittering stars. Shadow could tell he was distressed; he knew his master well enough to be able to tell. He lowered his gaze from the sky to his partner, leaning down slightly to his level. The ancient Organoid had been one of the first to be brought into existence by the Zoid Eve, and despite being centuries old he was the most powerful of his kind and had a deep knowledge and desire to please and soothe, although to his master every aspect of him was useless except for that power.

"Do you see them, Shadow? The stars?" Raven said suddenly, his gaze remaining focused on the night sky. Shadow growled a feral 'yes', leaning closer to his master. From the scent of the human Shadow could tell something was bothering his master deeply. Raven sighed and looked down at his burned hand, the ruby scars seeming to gleam in the silvery light of the moons.

"It's clear. Van must be eliminated if I am to know peace..." the dark-clad Imperial said quietly, tearing his gaze from the scars to look up at the stars again. A shooting star fell from the heavens; its brilliance short lived, the pure light fading swiftly. Shadow growled softly and nosed his shoulder, trying to keep Raven from thinking dark thoughts. Dark thoughts would only breed more tension. Raven snorted and moved his shoulder, glaring at him dangerously.

"Leave me alone, Shadow..." the human growled, turning and walking back towards their small camp. Shadow sighed

quietly and followed him with his eyes, standing still as stone near the cliff. He had learned very early in their partnership that Raven hated any sort of physical, or even mental, contact but that didn't mean the Organoid didn't attempt to reach out to him. He knew that his reassurance helped Raven, although the young pilot never admitted it, and probably never would.

Shadow turned his gaze back to the sky, the twinkling lights very soothing to the dark Organoid. They had always calmed him for some reason and always helped to clear his mind, allowing him to think. Raven never realized it but they had much in common, and the ebony-haired boy never gave much thought as to what he did for him. Shadow always built the fire and set up camp, dressed his wounds and got food and water; if something were to happen to him, Raven wouldn't know how to take care of himself.

'But of course I shall not let anything happen to me; Raven is unwise in the way of things as simple as mending wounds and finding sustenance in the desert... he would not last without my guidance...' Shadow thought, glancing back at Raven. The pilot was sitting on his sleeping bag, looking up at the stars, much like the Organoid was. *'I do not believe thou are aware of how much I do for thee, human 'hatchling', but it is of no concern; I shall care for thee no matter what befalls us...'* he thought at the human, smirking slightly before he turned and quietly made his way into the small camp.

A small fire Shadow had made previously was burning in the middle of the camp, the soft gold light illuminating the campsite. Raven's sleeping bag was neatly laid out, again by the dark Organoid, though it was now disheveled due to the pilot laying on it. The canteen was carelessly thrown down to the sand, empty. The blanket Shadow always laid out for him was kicked next to the fire. Raven didn't like to use it; he, for some reason, thought that using a blanket in the cold showed weakness or something. Shadow really didn't care; he just couldn't understand the reasoning of humans sometimes. An

electric lantern was a few yards from Raven's sleeping bag, turned off; the only light came from the fire.

Raven was lying back on the sleeping bag with his arms folded under his head, his amethyst eyes closed. He looked to be almost asleep but Shadow knew better; the human could spend hours there unmoving with his eyes closed, deeply pondering some thought or goal beyond the Organoid's knowing. Despite the cold of the desert night the pilot wasn't inside the sleeping bag; he was merely lying on top of it, the biting cold seemingly of no annoyance to the young soldier.

"Shadow, go fetch some more water..." Raven commanded without opening his eyes, tossing the empty canteen towards the dark Organoid. Shadow caught it in his jaws before growling softly in understanding. He spread his faded red wings and lifted silently into the darkened sky, following Raven's command without question. He beat his wings and winged off towards the nearby canyon where he knew fresh water was located. The darkness and desert winds were no hindrance to Shadow, the dark Organoid gliding effortlessly over the calm and silent desert like some metallic phantom.

'Something dark is amiss... Raven is more tense than I have seen him in a great while... I fear he is worried of something...' Shadow pondered, curious as to Raven's recent strange behavior. *'I only recall him being so uneasy on the night before the death of the Geno Saurer... perhaps something unfortunate is in his near future?'* he thought, but shook his head to clear his thoughts; he couldn't afford to let himself be distracted by such frivolous thoughts.

Shadow growled and flapped his wings, slowly lowering down to the desert floor at the mouth of the canyon. Below him crystal clear water trickled up from a spring; the mirror-like surface distorting with the gentlest of ripples as he beat his draconic wings. Shadow settled to the ground, flapping his wings one last time before he folded them away. He shook his long body, freeing all the sand and dust from his smoke-

grey armor.

The ebony Organoid leaned down and grasped the canteen in his claws, unscrewing the cap before dipping it into the cool water. Ripples spread across the glassy surface, the image of the stars and moons reflected in its mirror-like surface distorting for the briefest of instants. The only noise came from the sound of the water filling the metal canteen; no other noise echoing down the silent canyon.

/Well Shadow, I am surprised, a powerful Organoid such as yourself taking orders from someone as weak as Raven... / A dark voice said suddenly, making Shadow snap his head up. He glared in the direction of the voice, and narrowed his eyes as he spied two glowing emerald orbs in the darkness.

/Silence, hatchling! / Shadow hissed, his body tensing as he prepared to attack the young Organoid.

/No need to worry Shadow, brother of Eve, I did not come for a quarrel with you... / Ambient said calmly, /... I just came to talk... /

/What causes you to believe I shall willingly listen to thee, Ambient? / Shadow spat, snarling at the crimson Organoid.

/I just wished to tell you that you deserve better than that brat Raven, Shadow... / Ambient said smoothly, stalking slowly out of the darkness with an eerie sort of grace that set the dark Organoid on edge, /... you do not deserve to be misused and abused by that arrogant human. Why have you not left that human yet? Or better yet, why have you not killed him? If I had had the misfortune of obtaining a partner like Raven the boy would have had an unfortunate 'accident' by now. You are not bound to the human, you can just leave if you so desired... /

/Speak what thou will, I shall never abandon Raven, hatchling, he depends on me ... even if he is not fully aware

of it / Shadow growled, quickly growing impatient with the young crimson Organoid, /Regardless, even if he is an unruly human 'hatchling' he does not deserve to be abandoned! He deserves someone to be with him, to guide and protect him, to comfort him... /

/Such a noble sentiment... / Ambient smirked with a smoothness that caused Shadow to grow uneasy, /... but in all honesty Shadow, has the thought not once crossed your mind? You deserve a partner that at least cares for your wellbeing. Even I can tell you are falling into disrepair from Raven's lack of attentiveness to your health. Hiltz may not be the best of masters but after 'taming' me he offered me guidance, knowledge, *power*. But what of your Raven? The boy will not even let you touch him... to me, that does not seem like a healthy bond of trust... /

/I do not recalling asking thy opinion, Ambient... / Shadow growled, narrowing his sapphire eyes, /... the prospect of taking his life for his mistreatment of me entered my thoughts but once when I was but freshly tamed, but regardless of how enraged his actions may make me I cannot ever bring myself to harm him... /

/I could always kill the human for you... / Ambient smirked in dark humor, flicking the deadly spines that armed his tail as he flashed his deadly razored teeth. The sight caused Shadow's armor to bristle.

/Silence thy tongue, Ambient!! I shall never allow you to harm my master!! / Shadow roared, baring his teeth threateningly and flexing his claws.

/Calm yourself, brother of Eve, I never said I would *actually* kill him... / Ambient replied with the same calm smoothness, the twisted smirk never leaving his muzzle, /... but in all honesty I came here to inform you of something, Shadow; something you would be inclined to know... /

/I do not care of what thou hath to speak, hatchling.../
Shadow growled deeply, starting to turn to fly away. His temper was beginning to fray with each moment he spent in the crimson Organoid's presence.

/I recommend you ought to start looking for a new master, Shadow.../ Ambient said, a wicked grim spreading across his muzzle. Shadow instantly froze, turning back to the red Organoid, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

/What does thou mean, hatchling?/ Shadow said, growing worried and nervous that Raven was in danger.

/I am merely saying I have a feeling something unfortunate is going to happen to Raven, or you, when he fights Van .../
Ambient spoke almost softly, taking a few steps to Shadow's side to better observe his dark counterpart, /... I advise you to escape from Raven's tyrannous control while you still have the chance. Van and his cohorts are learning the faults of you and the Geno Breaker; they know of the fuse limit. They have likely planned for it; if you and Raven go blindly into battle with them one of you will be killed, and personally I do not wish to see a fellow brother of Eve die fighting for a cause as meaningless as for your master's petty desire for revenge .../

/Thou concern is appreciated, 'brother' .../ Shadow spat the word out with disdain, /... but my master and I will not be halted so easily. We have destroyed countless foes before, and Van and his allies shall be no different.../ the obsidian Organoid growled, spreading his wings and flying up and out of the canyon, leaving Ambient behind without a second thought.

Shadow grasped the canteen tightly in his claws, turning and soaring in the direction of Raven's camp. As much as he hated to admit it, Ambient had made a point. *'Raven may be an arrogant hatchling, but without me he would not last... perhaps I do deserve better, but I could never abandon or kill him, I just could not bear the thought of it... but of what misfortune does Ambient*

Speak of? Is it true that Van has discovered the Breaker's sole weakness? Or was he merely bluffing? I do not know...' Shadow shook his head, focusing on flying to keep his mind off of the confusing and disturbing thoughts.

The winds had died down, and he made it back to their small camp quickly. He circled once, looking down and making sure everything was all right. Raven appeared to have fallen asleep and the fire was getting dangerously low, merely a smoldering point of amber upon the dark sands. Shadow slowly lowered to the ground, beating his wings as his feet touched the ground, creating a whirlwind of sand. He shook himself and growled in annoyance, the sand clinging to his smoothly armored body; the coarse grains scratched at him and grinded in his joints.

Shadow shook his head and snorted loudly, holding the filled canteen in his talons. Raven was asleep, lying on his side on the sleeping bag, eyes closed and body relaxed. Shadow's dramatic landing hadn't done any good to the dying fire, only a few glowing embers and lonely flares remaining of the flames. The desert was silent once again, no noise drifting over the sand; it was almost as if the landscape was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

The grey-ebony Organoid quietly walked over to Raven, setting the canteen next to his sleeping bag. The young ebony-haired boy didn't even stir; he was in a deep sleep. The dark Organoid quickly turned his attention to the fire, which was threatening to die out if it wasn't fed wood at the very moment. Shadow walked over to it and kicked a few logs into the embers, which sated the fire's hunger for fuel; the flames built up and once again chased away the darkness.

'Could Ambient be correct?' Shadow thought, his glowing blue eyes staring into the dancing orange flames of the fire, *'Raven has been tense of late... is some horrible misfortune awaiting my master? Or me, for that matter? But I feel the danger comes not from Van; I doubt he and his allies have discovered my fuse limit*

with the Geno Breaker. I feel Hiltz may be plotting something; he behaved curiously smug and calm after speaking with the Dark Kaiser... he is conceiving something...' the Organoid snorted and dismissed his thoughts, not wanting to trouble himself over the meaningless events. A calm, cool wind brushed past him, the cold breeze not at all bothering the dark Organoid.

A quiet noise behind him made Shadow turn, his bright gaze falling upon his sleeping partner. Raven groaned quietly and started shivering, the cold no doubt bothering the young human. Shadow didn't realize just how cold it was; he was an Organoid, so the cold didn't really register or bother him. Since Raven had dozed off, he was lying on top of his sleeping bag and exposed to the cold and wind. The fact that the fire had died down while he had been getting water hadn't helped much; his master must have gotten too cold during his short time away.

Shadow looked around and spied the blanket Raven had carelessly kicked near the fire. The fabric was warm from the flames, even though the fire must have been low most of the time he had been getting water. The shadowy Organoid picked the blanket up in his claws, careful not to rip the fabric with his razor-like claws. He quietly carried it over to Raven, trying to keep from waking his young partner from his slumber.

Being as quiet as he could, Shadow carefully laid the warm blanket over him, hoping it would be enough to keep the human warm through the night. Raven instantly stopped shivering, sighing quietly and falling back into a deep sleep. Shadow carefully stepped back, hoping Raven wouldn't wake up and yell at him for covering him in the blanket and disturbing his sleep. Thankfully, the young pilot didn't stir and Shadow walked silently back over to the fire.

Groaning quietly, Shadow crouched down next to the fire, letting the warmth of the flames envelope his metal body. He sighed happily and closed his eyes, basking in the welcome

warmth. Even though the cold was of no bother to the metal dragon he still enjoyed the warmth of the fire on his metallic body on a cold night. The dark Organoid growled deep in his throat and curled his tail around himself, though he still kept his legs and arms beneath his body in a crouch, in case he needed to jump up to drive away any wild animals or threats to his human charge.

Shadow twisted around and bit at the joints on his armored body, feeling the annoying grinding of sand in the seams. He loathed the feeling; it made him feel old and decrepit, and also pained him slightly. Normally his partner would have carried out the task of cleaning the sand from his critical joints, but Raven scarcely cared about his well being so he had learned to care for health himself. He never could clean away all of the sand on his own, but he cleaned out enough that it wasn't of any hindrance to his movement.

A moment later Shadow lifted his head, his glowing sapphire eyes looking up to the stars. The glittering, sparkling stars seemed to be specks of diamond on the ebony background of the sky, looking almost like holes punched in a backlit obsidian canopy. The streaks of light that colored the sky seemed to have been painted on the black sky and glittered with a silver and gold light; the glowing of the Milky Way. The night was clear and calm, nothing stopping the light of the stars and moons from reaching the Organoid's gleaming optics.

As he watched, a single star began to glow brighter than the others, before it began to fall, leaving a streak of silvery light as it descended. Shadow watched as it painted its path across the sky, looking like a silver teardrop sliding down the black sky. He blinked his glowing eyes, watching as it began to dim. A thought crossed his mind- that he should wish upon it- but he thought it was ridiculous. Organoids were incapable of being superstitious, therefore human customs such as wishing upon meteors or carrying 'lucky' trinkets

or talismans made little logical sense him. But as the star began to fade, however, he gave the idea a second thought. *'Why not? It cannot hurt...'* he thought, shrugging slightly in an oddly human gesture. He looked at the falling star a last time before he closed his glittering eyes, sighing softly and relaxing.

/ Mother Eve, I pray to thee to grant that no harm shall come to my master, Raven, in the coming conflicts. May nothing harm him if I shall fall in battle. If I must die, I beg of thee to protect and guard him with thy power; he is little more than a frightened hatchling deep down... / the shadowy Organoid said softly, opening his eyes. Shadow looked up and was surprised to see the star still falling, its light growing weak as it began to fade. Just before its light died away, however, it flashed brilliantly, almost like a promise to grant his wish, before it faded from existence. He stared at the empty area in space the star once occupied, wondering if what he had just done was as idiotic as it seemed.

'It is just a falling star, it is not like wishing upon it will actually accomplish anything...' Shadow tried to reassure himself, *'... but what if I shall fall in battle? Will my plea to Mother Eve accomplish anything?'* he thought, lowering his gaze to the sand before him, *'... will Raven be safe if I shall fade from existence? Will he be able to learn to care for his needs and battle without the Breaker's true power? Or will he be seized by the enemy, or worse?'* Shadow shook his head and exhaled loudly, not wanting to think such thoughts of death.

Shadow lowered his head to the cool sand with a sigh, his sapphire eyes closing and body fully relaxing. The heat of the fire had fully warmed his metal body, though he had no intention to leave his spot by the fire. He sighed again, his warm metallic breath stirring the sand beneath his head. Shadow loved times like these, when he had time to himself, to just relax and think without Raven's interruption.

Another calm wind slowly spilled over the small camp,

washing over Shadow's body like cool water. It didn't bother him in the slightest; the metal of his body retaining the warmth from the flames. But just as he started to doze off, he heard a stressed sigh from Raven, making him open his eyes slightly. He lifted his head and looked back at his sleeping partner, and as he had expected the young human was shivering again. Apparently humans weren't built for cold nights in the desert; how such a delicate creature could survive at all on Zi was a mystery to the miniature Zoid.

Snorting in slight annoyance, Shadow got to his feet, turning and walked silently over to his young master. Raven was still asleep, though he was shivering from the cold winds. Shadow leaned down and lightly nosed his cheek, but pulled back instantly, the young pilot's skin cold to the touch from the winds. He hummed and cocked his head slightly, not really knowing if his partner's shivering and coldness was of concern or not or was just a normal reaction to the cold. The human curling into a ball to keep warm told the Organoid he probably should be concerned, and decided to do something.

Growling softly, Shadow laid down next to his master, gently curling around his sleeping form. The Organoid was hoping the heat his metal body had absorbed from the fire would warm his human master. He was very careful not to wake Raven, knowing he would get a hard rasp on the nose for doing this if the human awoke; the boy truly despised the physical touch of another. But instead of waking up, like the Organoid had expected, Raven instead stopped shivering, Shadow's body warming him and shielding him from the chilling winds. Shadow hummed quietly and looked at his partner, his glittering sapphire eyes closing slightly. Even though months had passed, the ancient Organoid knew Raven was still recovering physically from the years in the desert. He was still weak and his strength still returning; his body still trying to recover and heal from the harsh, cruel treatment of the uncaring desert. Shadow had been paying close attention to him for he knew his master could easily

harm himself in his state by overexerting himself, even if the human didn't realize it.

Shadow sighed and lowered his head to the sand, closing his glowing blue eyes. The sand was seeping into his joints due to the position he was in, the grinding feeling greatly bothering the Organoid. He could have easily gotten up and found a more comfortable perch on the Geno Breaker, but he knew Raven needed to stay warm or else he could fall ill. Shadow knew that any sort of illness would be catastrophic, for if Raven was even weakened slightly and his focus dulled even in the least he could get severely injured or killed in a battle.

As if responding to his thoughts the ebony-haired human shifted slightly and groaned, no doubt sensing Shadow curled around him, even though he was deep in sleep. Shadow snorted quietly and lifted his head, looking down at his master. Raven stirred again and his breathing fluttered; the Organoid could easily sense how oddly tense and restless he was. Growling softly, Shadow leaned down and licked the young human's cheek, hoping it would calm him enough for him to sleep; it had always worked when the pilot had been young and suffering from nightmares. It appeared to work, for Raven stilled instantly, his breathing evening and body relaxing.

A moment later, however, Shadow felt the dark-haired pilot's arms lightly wrap around his muzzle, bringing the Organoid's nose to the human's chest. Raven was only half asleep, just barely sensing Shadow's presence, but his subconscious reacted to the Organoid and wanted him close. Shadow blinked his eyes in shock, for he had expected to be smacked for his action, nothing like this. He recovered and thrummed softly, gently nuzzling into his chest. Raven didn't react, for he had fallen back into a deep slumber, his arms still wrapped loosely around his snout. Shadow sighed and lowered his head slowly back to the sand; after all, he didn't

want to wake Raven and he didn't want this moment to end.

The Organoid began to make a low, deep-throated purring noise, the sound reverberating throughout his body. Shadow knew Raven would never do such a thing as this consciously and was only doing so because he was asleep but he didn't care; for the first time since the human had tamed him he actually felt... *needed*. That was all the ancient Organoid could have ever asked of his young master. He knew that the moment Raven woke he would be harshly reprimanded for touching him without permission, but Shadow scarcely cared; he had waited a long time for him to 'reach out' to him, and he wasn't going to let the human's plea go unanswered. Shadow was well aware that Raven saw him as little more than a tool and that he scarcely cared about him or accepted his company, but the Organoid longed only to see him happy and safe. The only thing the dark Organoid could ever wish for if he was to fade away was that Raven would be safe without him there to protect him. To Shadow, Raven was little more than a 'hatchling'; nowhere near ready to face the world alone. He could only hope that his 'wish' would be fulfilled, and that Raven would be protected and guided without his presence.

Just as the Shadow's eyes closed and the Organoid drifted off to sleep, a star flashed in the heavens, and shot across the sky...

Michelle Gray
Wildflowers



NAAN



Combat Motivation

You are ancient.

You feel the continents push against your bones. West, East, Lost Continent; they do not have these names for you yet. You feel the weight of the water above your iron prison and the way the oxygen diffuses out of it slowly, making small air bubbles against your protective shell. It has been a very, *very* long wait. The world has shifted during your sleep, your great slow hibernation. You dreamed in seconds ticking.

And then the sea shifts. There are scrabblings and you can read biomechanical life signs, the coursing of electricity through hydraulic legs. These are not Zoids like you; they do not move like an Ultimate X, with intent and precision. There is human delay in their clawing. When they dig you up and crack open your coffin just before sealing it again, you do not see the second pair of eyes from the black box behind their gazes.

Because they are not opponents worth your time to face, and because you are encrusted with time and sealed with it, your joints old and empty of fluids and your life dimmed down to a spark, you remain still. There is still a little rivulet of eternal battery. It would be very difficult to move, now, but not impossible. You feel your quiet potential.

And then, because it has been a long, long lifetime beneath the sea, you sleep.

*

The next light you register is blue and blinks—no, sweeps—up past your eyes and across your matte black chest and over your shoulders. You are suspended in a gyroscopic scanner and you have been renovated. If not for the magnetic field

keeping your metal bulk floating, you could move.

The room is small. You see it in triangular glimpses past the spinning bands of the gyroscope. There is a door behind the humans big enough for them to have brought you through. The humans are quiet and barely noticeable; you look down on the top of their dark-haired heads. One female, one male, you note of these aliens that walk so temporarily on Zi's surface. (It is not for them, this planet. They have taken it temporarily; wherever you are now, it is a place built for humans, although you had thought that they might be long gone by the time you woke up. But Zi is stone and Zoids are stone and humans are flesh, and so, someday, they will be gone.)

*

You see them again on the day the boy tries to break you. First he is a small, straight-backed figure on the silver ground, and then he gives you words.

“Hello, Berserk Fury.”

They are not Zoidian; they are the new tongue, and you need to connect old memories before you realize that. Humans have grown more successful than you predicted. (But then, they are things of blood and bone and you, birthed from Zi, are metal and plate and spark, and so you accept that the humans are alien and therefore hard to predict.)

*

The boy has fight in him. His is the calmness of digging claws in before the final strike, of pistons slamming down into the dirt and the air being ripped apart, invisible at its edges. There is a charged energy to his poise. You cannot help but obey him; the tamed modern Zoids are not built to disobey, and although you are ancient you are also tamed. The black box guarantees it, pulling at the cords of your reactions. And

so you simply feel Vega present, but the way the little warrior moves teaches you all you need to know.

Vega has all the calm and all the wildness of one who is not afraid.

*

Your first fight is something that scorches against your skin like the sun and for a moment you are down on one knee in the desert and the Lightning Saix are circling, heads bobbing as if their plate-and-plastic faces could sniff for meat. Vega times it and you watch him do it. You whip around and snap your teeth around the nearest Saix's neck, feeling the pins under your jaw drive in and lock. You spin and plant a foot and your teeth push between pipes and you throw one Saix into the path of another, and this young Vega is an acceptable pilot.

Then the Liger senses you and opens its mouth a little bit to show that cave of yellow teeth and you see how it works with its pilot too, how they are a little divided because the Zoid is *thinking for itself*—

And so, when Vega commands the particle cannon to fire and *you are not ready yet*, you are beginning to burn up from the inside, the sea is so far gone, but you are almost all right with your burning, because you have finally found your enemy, your other half, the last great thinker in this world of metal muscle—

And the woman you saw on the day of your rebirth commands Vega to stop, and he agrees.

You wish you could shake, you are so eager.

*

You lay your head down against the ground to let him out

and the boy puts his arm across your eye and you are not sure why. He is so close that you lose track of him in the pixels but he is pressing his cheek against your cheek and maybe he is doing the shaking for you.

*

You wonder where the Liger Zero is.

(It is standing fifty meters from the Hover Cargo, watching its pilot watch the sunset-colored bands of cloud. They have finished with words, they have finished with secondhand parts and battles against machines. There is life in their future, if they can survive it.)

*

When you reach the Ultrasaurus wreck Vega works the levers and console, but you have disengaged yourself from them. *He* is in the other direction, ponderous and slow and ready for you like a fresh carcass. Vega calls you by name—by that emotion-word, *Fury*, but then he sees the Liger too and it is not about words any more—just about emotion. About rivalry.

*

The Shadow Fox is down and the Hover Cargo is down and the Liger leaps out of the smoke, sunlight wreathing its claws. It ricochets off the ground in one controlled lunge and rakes claws across your face. You bend to grab its neck in your teeth but it is so fast you almost double over yourself, and then the Liger is tearing up your shoulder and you rip it down to the ground and hold it there until it wriggles free, wrenching up again, and this is not a human battle. Vega and Bit are holding on and sweating and thinking that maybe their frantic hands on the controls are doing something. This is an animal battle. For a time, you forget about guns and humans. Then Vega triggers the cutting edges of your saws and you are all back,

all four of you, Fury and Liger and Vega and Bit, running across the wide spine of the Ultrasaurus.

(Zoids have always had this *combat motivation* system working in the background of their processes, driving them, and humans do not really know what it is until it reaches two hundred percent and is breaking their scales and you, Fury, your arms hanging limp because Vega is limp but your mind is *so alive*, show them.)

And as you die, becoming a dead machine instead of a living animal, you feel Vega still trying, pulling himself away from your dying thrashes and still working the controls, sending sparks out into broken circuits, fighting one moment, running the next. You wonder whether he wants to save you or to charge ahead. Your throat is ripping open. You think that he does not know what he wants. Vega will survive. He is vicious and determined and intelligent, and now he knows what it is to lose everything that he thought supported him.

He is twelve.

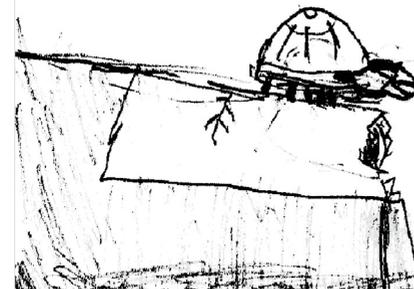
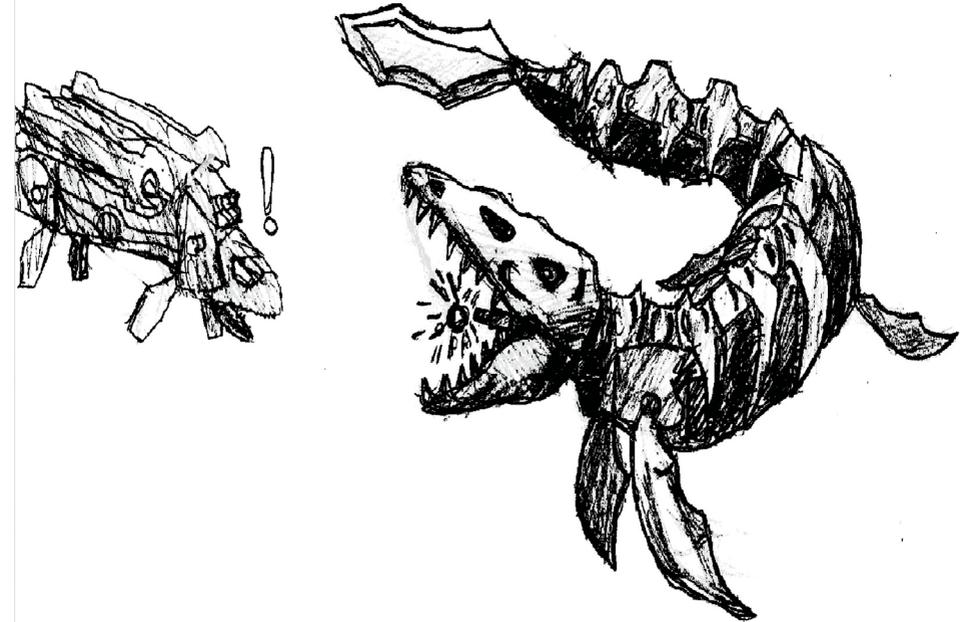
He is ancient.

└

Terror of the Deep

BIO TYLO
TYLOS AURUS TYPE

pika247



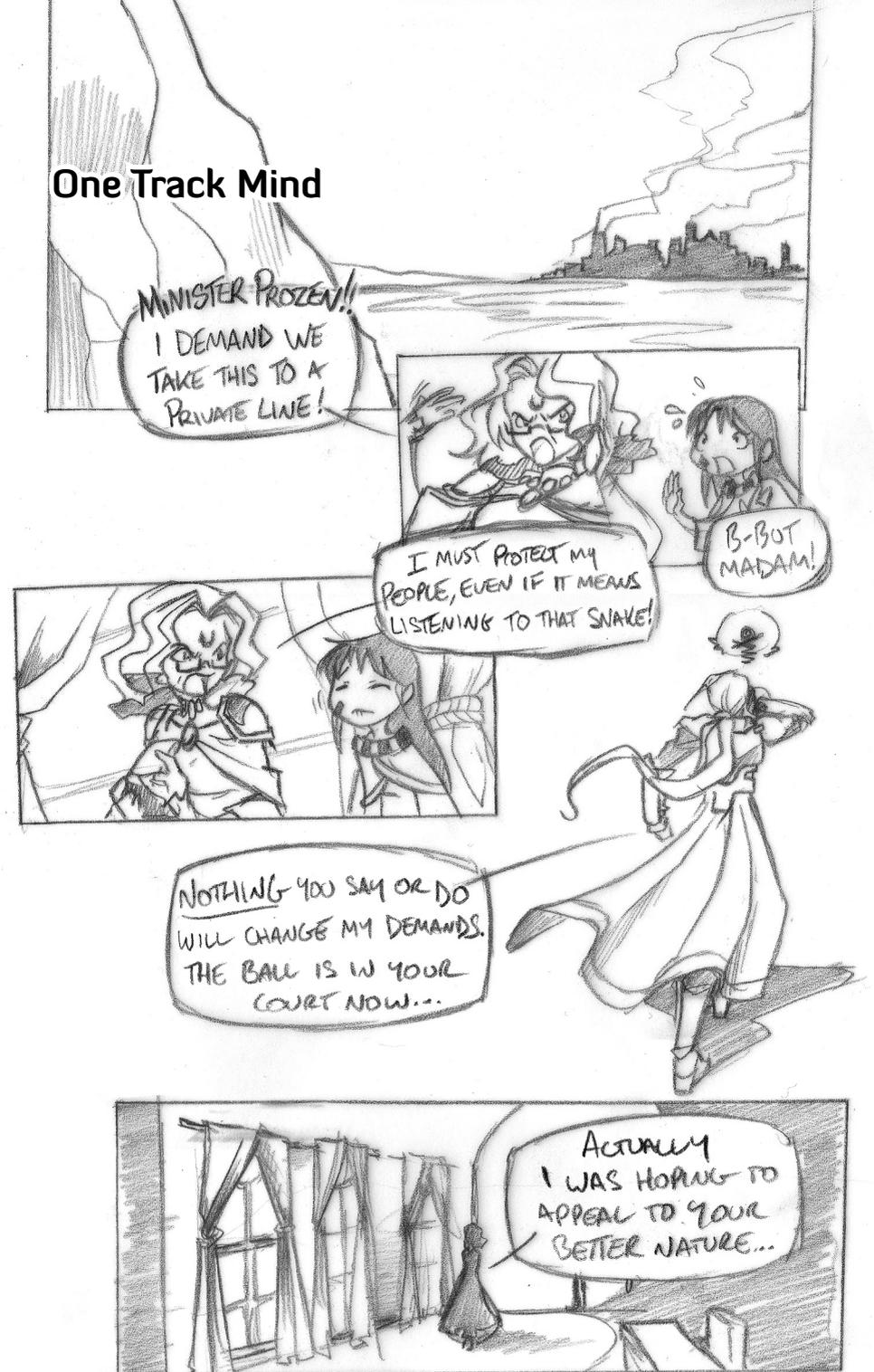
The Digald Army's new aquatic Bio Zoid has been unleashed. Its Bio Particle Cannon laying waste to all opposing Zoids, as this War Shark is about to find out.

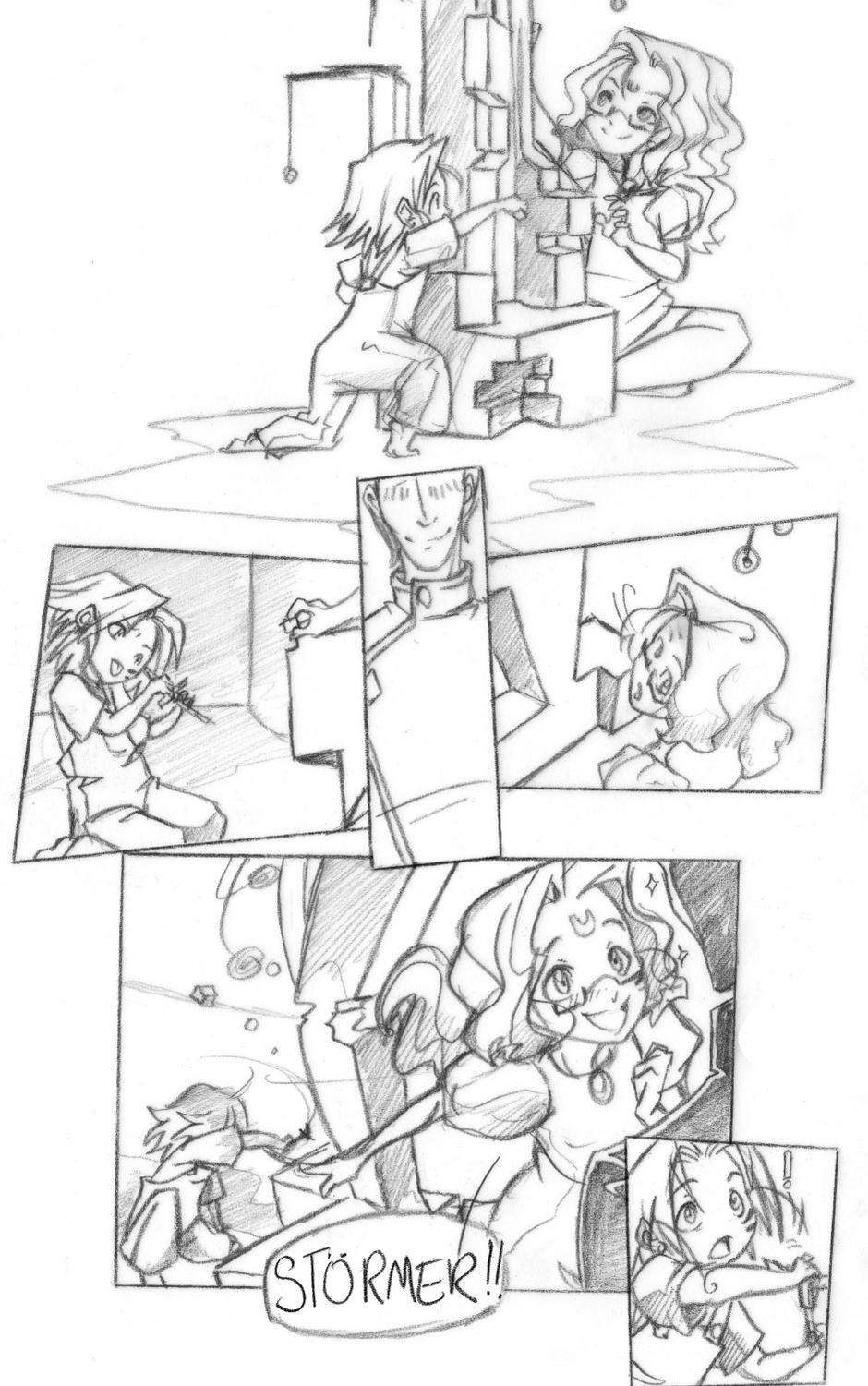
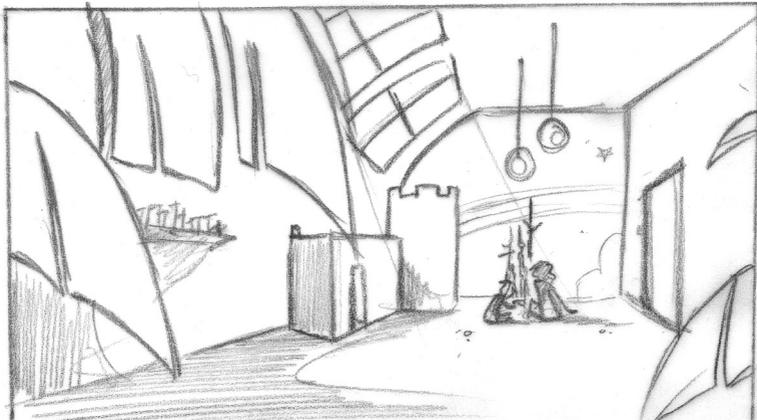
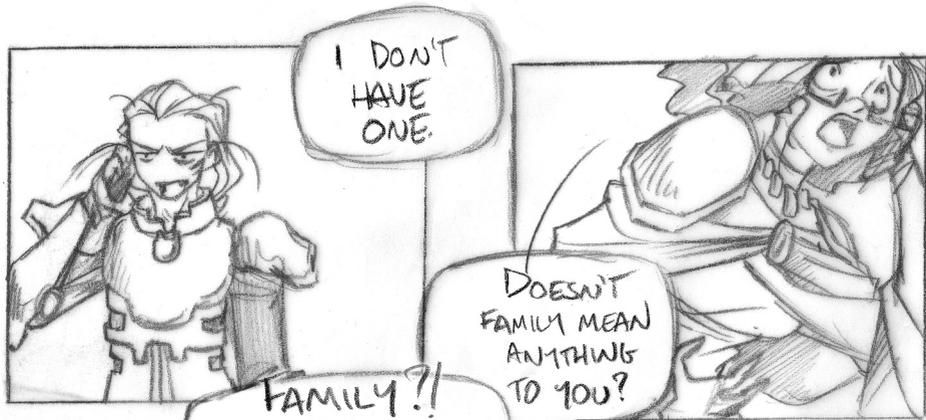
Plink

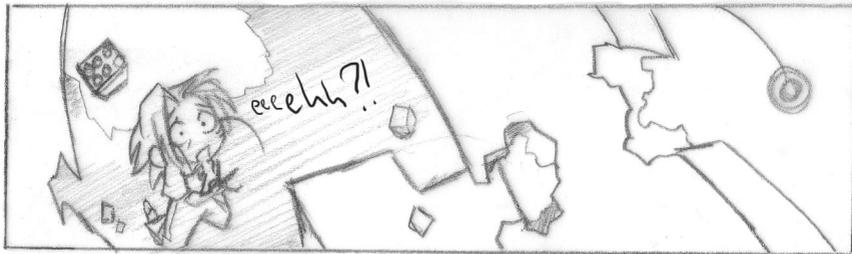
Tea and Sympathy



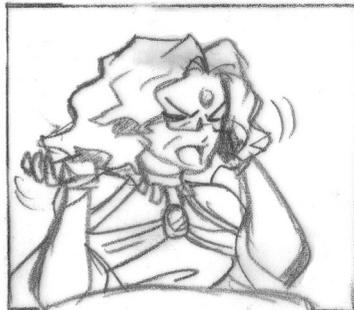
One Track Mind



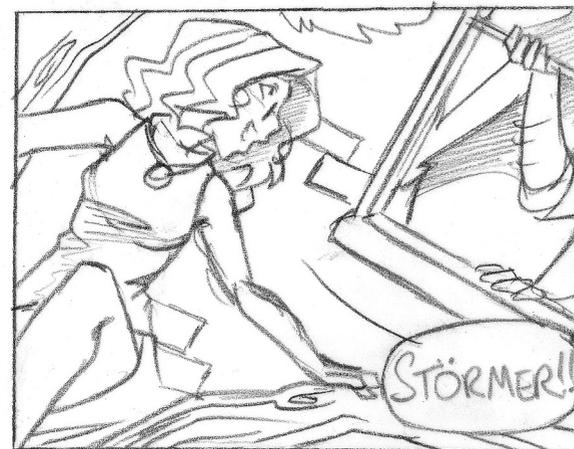
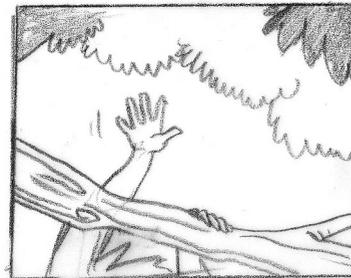
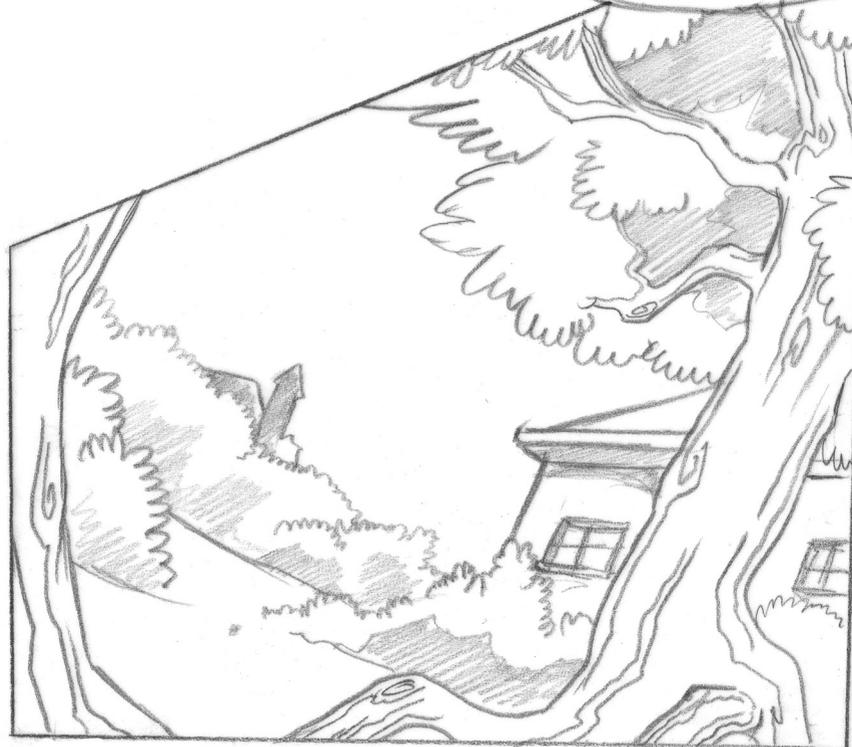




I KNEW THIS
ATTACK ON HELIC
WAS PERSONAL.



OHHH YOU WEREN'T
EVEN HURT.

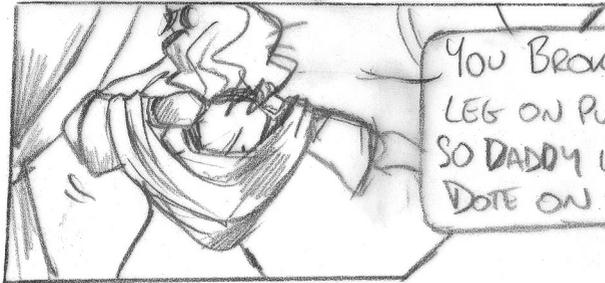




CRACK

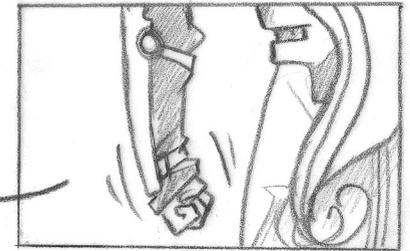


YOU SMELLED
GOOD ENOUGH TO
EAT AFTERWARDS



YOU BROKE YOUR
LEG ON PURPOSE
SO DADDY WOULD
DOTE ON YOU!!

OH YES. IT'S VERY
MANLY TO SMELL
LIKE VANILLA CAKE
AND THE DOGS....!



I FEEL A
CAKE MOMENT
COMING ON...



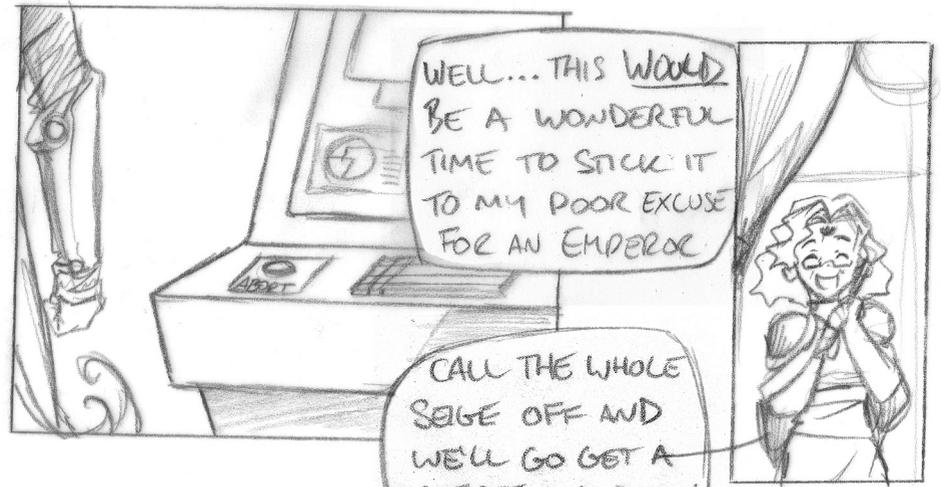
YOU KNOW,
LOOKING BACK I
SHOULD REALLY BE
ANGRY WITH HIM.



I SAID I WAS SORRY. A LOT. WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?



YOU WERE THE RUNT OF THE LITTER. TROUBLE AND YOU... JUST HAPPENED.

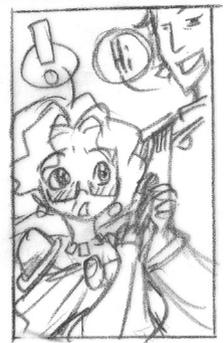


WELL... THIS WOULD BE A WONDERFUL TIME TO STICK IT TO MY POOR EXCUSE FOR AN EMPEROR

CALL THE WHOLE SEIGE OFF AND WE'LL GO GET A COFFEE AND CATCH UP!

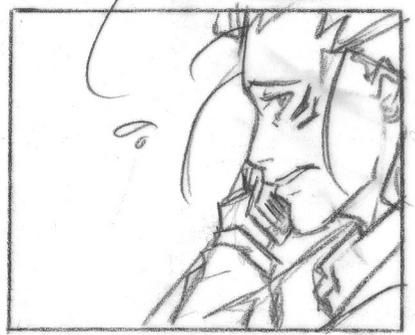


YOU KNOW... I...



ELENA?

W-WAIT. ARE WE... RECONCILING?



I'M NOT SURE.



STÖRMER!
ROBBIE'S ♥ NOT BACK FROM PLAYING WAR YET...



ATTACK!!



Que



Liger Zero
Zoids Cosplay

www.que-ser-aser-a.deviantart.com



Liger Zero
Zoids Cosplay

www.que-ser-a-ser-a.deviantart.com

My idea for this cosplay came to me early spring of 2008; I wanted to use a method that would allow me to have interchangeable armor, and so I started planning. Since I have more experience in sewing than with cardboard or foam, that was going to be my course. Smooth, plastic leather was decided for the armor and it was to be stuffed with Polyfill.

The only pieces I bought were for the chassis – dance slacks, leotard, socks, and crocs. Every other piece of this costume I made myself. I designed my own patterns, cut out the fabric, sewed the pieces together, and finally stuffed them. All this work was done between July of 2009 and January of 2010, when the first version of my costume was complete.

Liger Zero Plushie was debuted at Ohayocon 2010 with an incredible amount of feedback. Many Zoids fans recognized my costume, which made me proud. My costume was made purposefully to be light, durable, and overall comfortable, so I was able to walk around the entire weekend, requiring only a small amount of repairs. Since then I've made improvements, replacing parts that turned out to be fragile, like the rods on my tail gun and the booster backpack.

In the future I plan to create the other pieces for Liger Zero, perhaps for a future volume of Zoids Fan Anthologies!



Oddities

Screee-eeeeaarr...hissthump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

Screee-eeeeaarr...hissthump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

It was an odd sound that woke Thane from his doze against the well. He groaned and wiggled out a stretch, sitting up slightly straighter against the dusty brickwork. He raised his right hand to shield his eyes, still needing to squint slightly as he gazed out at the vast desert spread before him.

Screee-eeeeaarr...hissthump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

The sound was far away, but each thump corresponded with a slight shaking of the dry red ground. Thane strained his eyes looking in the direction he knew the sound had come from. Unfortunately the heat-haze against the sky made anything on the horizon shaky and uncertain. Was that black shape new, or had it been there yesterday? He couldn't be sure.

"BOY!"

Thane jumped at the voice, scrabbling to his sandaled feet. He turned and crouched at the edge of the well, peeking over the lip.

"GET OUT HERE, BOY!"

(Screee-eeeeaarr...hissthump. Thump. Thump. Thump.)

He could just barely see Hoyt across the yard. The slave-master held a leather-bound rod in one hand, three knotted ropes dangling from its end. He lifted his hand and thrashed it through the air so that the whipping ropes caused a loud crack. Thane cringed at the sound, the several scars along his spine stinging at the memory of those knots.

"I send ya out te get water, and look what happens! I know ye're aroun' boy! Ain' nowhere ta go asides here!"

Hoyt was right. Aside from a grove of trees about a mile distant, there was no place a slave boy could go. All around was empty, scorching desert. Even getting to the trees was a stretch, as Thane knew from one of his previous disappearances. He also knew that there was nothing to be desired in the trees. Their fruit was bitter and upsetting to the stomach, and the only above-ground water was mud-caked and infested with some kind of insect eggs.

"Boy!"

Screee-eeeeaarr...hissthump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

Hoyt's voice was fainter as he turned away from the well, but the other sound was getting closer. Thane dared a quick look over his shoulder. Either his mind was playing tricks on him, or that black shape was coming closer. He heard Hoyt's whip crack through the air once more and realized that it didn't matter if his mind was playing tricks on him or not. He needed to figure out how to deal with Hoyt.

Looking at the well, Thane realized that he'd filled the bucket before sitting down for a quick rest. He'd left the bucket below the lip of the well, and the thing was still mostly full. He glanced to Hoyt and waited for the man to turn away before quickly untying the bucket and bringing it to his chest. He quietly crawled around to the side of the well. Reaching into the bucket he took a small amount of water in his cupped hand and splashed it on the ground before standing.

"Mister Hoyt, sir! I'm over here!"

(SCREEE-eeeeaarr...hissthump. Thump. Thump. Thump.)

The thick-around-the-middle slave-master turned at Thane's call. His usually handsome features - a trait not often seen in

men of Hoyt's station - were disfigured into a snarl.

"Where ya bin, rat? Thought ya'd run off agin didja?"

It was as if Hoyt hadn't even seen the bucket in Thane's hands.

"No, sir. I spilled my first bucket, and had to send down another." Thane pointed to the water he had spilled, illustrating his story. He hoped he had scattered just the right amount to make his story believable. It was a small amount, but water evaporated quickly out here, after all.

Hoyt reached up a hand and scratched at the slight stubble along his chin. He let out a small 'hmpf' and turned suspicious eyes on Thane. He had just opened his mouth to say something when there was the sound of a door banging open.

SCREEE-eeaaaarr...hissthump. sThump. sThump. sThump.

Of course the odd noise followed the door bang. But apparently Hoyt was somewhat hard-of-hearing, or perhaps he was too busy glancing towards the residency to notice.

"Ah, Hoyt! I've been looking for you!" Pascal Fletcher, owner of the desert-bound estate, sauntered through the doorway. There was no urgency in his step, making Thane wonder why he'd slammed the door. "And young Thane, as well. Having a nice little chat, are we?"

"Ah, no, sir. We, uh..." Hoyt stumbled over his words. He was careful to hide his harsh treatment of the slaves from Fletcher. The young-ish land owner was kind to all and Hoyt had a niggling suspicion that his employer wouldn't want to keep him around if he knew about the harsher of his 'methods.'

Fletcher walked up, his features splitting into a grin so that his perfect, pearly-white teeth shone. He clapped a hand

onto Hoyt's shoulder. "No need to explain, my friend. Unfortunately I need to ask to borrow this handsome young fellow from you for a spell." He thumped Hoyt's shoulder merrily and turned back towards the residence. "Come now, Thane. No time to dally."

Thane danced on the balls of his feet, glancing between Hoyt and Fletcher. The former glowered at him, grabbed the bucket of water, and swatted him towards Fletcher with the three-pronged whip. The slap didn't hurt, but served to remind him of what he had to look forward to later. Swallowing a nervous lump, Thane turned and ran to catch up with Fletcher.

SCREEE-eeaaaarr...hissthump. sThump. sThump. sThump.

Thane glanced over his shoulder at the sound, but Hoyt and the well stood in the direction he had seen the black shape before, now blocking his view. He turned back to watch where he was walking. Maybe it had been a trick of his imagination, but as he turned back it seemed as though he caught Fletcher turning away quickly, as though the man had been looking at him. Thane shook away the thought as soon as it entered his mind. Why would Fletcher be sneaking a look at him, of all people?

The tall, leanly muscled figure that was Fletcher led Thane into the residence. It was Thane's first venture into the white stucco building, but the pair didn't go far. Fletcher made an almost immediate right into a room directly off the entrance, Thane following on his heels.

They entered into what appeared to be an office. The floor was hardwood - a rare commodity - covered by a deep-green rug patterned with elegant swirls of brown and off-white. Numerous floor-to-ceiling book cases filled with enormous leather-bound volumes of what Thane assumed to be reference books stood against the wood and cream walls. To be more specific, the walls were wood up to just below their middle, where a chair rail announced the transition to pale

cream paint. Fletcher strolled across the room, perching on the edge of a magnificent mahogany desk.

ssscreeeeeaaaaarr...sstump...tump...tump...tump...

The sound caused the window panes to shudder, but Thane tried not to notice.

“So, Thane. I just wanted to ask you a few questions.”

Thane looked up at Fletcher. The man’s wavy, sandy blonde hair shone slightly in the sunlight from the window. Fletcher had always been nice to Thane, but his current tone and the fact that he had been invited into Fletcher’s office made Thane nervous.

“You were not born on this estate, correct?”

“Ah, no, sir, though I’ve been here for as long as I can remember.”

Fletcher nodded, cradling his chin in his hand. “So you don’t know anything about your heritage?”

“No, sir.”

“Hmhmhm.” He turned to his desk, picking up a black, cylindrical object and holding it out to Thane. “Do you happen to know what this is?”

Thane stepped forward, taking the object. An odd feeling came over him as he took, almost like every hair on his body was standing on end. It passed quickly, and Thane decided to ignore it as a slight oddity in a day of more important strange happenings. As for the object, it was slightly rubbery, though the texture seemed only to be a coating over some kind of metal. The thing was hollow, the inner ‘chamber’ giving the top, or bottom, or whatever side of the thing it was a slightly domed shape. The sides were ridged, though to what

purpose Thane did not know.

“I’m sorry sir, but I have no idea.”

He handed the thing back to Fletcher, who held it with two hands, a faraway look in his eyes. “This object is what is known as a Gyro Cap. This particular one happens to be from a Zoid known as a Lightning Saix.” A slight shiver ran up Thane’s spine at the name. Fletcher seemed to notice. “Does that mean anything to you?”

Thane thought for a moment. He hadn’t heard it anywhere that he could remember, but it seemed oddly familiar. “No, sir, it doesn’t.”

Fletcher hummed thoughtfully and stood. “I see. I must ask you to follow me once more.”

There was definitely some kind of iron lump in Thane’s stomach. He could feel it rolling back and forth as he followed the man through the house and into a dim room where their footsteps echoed metallically.

A brief cracking sound made Thane flinch, but as the lights flickered on he realized that Fletcher had merely snapped his fingers to waken the fluorescent track lighting along the ceiling. The illumination allowed Thane to look around and find out that he had been led into a sort of garage. Two boxy vehicles sat to his left, surrounded by large boxes and various odds and ends of apparently mechanical nature.

Fletcher led Thane to the far wall, on which hung nylon straps of varying length and heavy-duty metal clips. Fletcher pulled down one set and spread it, revealing that it was a harness. He glanced between the harness and Thane before handing the thing to him, apparently satisfied.

“Go ahead and put that on.”

Thane fumbled with the straps, turning them about in his hands as Fletcher pulled down another harness from a different space of wall. He could see what appeared to be sections of his arms and legs, but couldn't tell which appendage went where. He was still deciding which arm to put through which hole when Fletcher finished with his own harness.

The tall man sighed and grabbed the harness from Thane, muttering to himself. Thane thought he caught the words 'don't' and 'time,' but he wasn't quite sure. Handling the harness as if it was second nature, Fletcher quickly had the straps situated on Thane's body. He indicated a few adjustable pieces and told Thane to tighten them as much as he could, then turned and strode to the nearest vehicle.

"Ganix!" A slightly stooped man appeared at the door through which Fletcher and Thane had entered. His hooked nose and the extra folds of skin around his eyes gave the appearance that he was displeased with something. "Call Aramis down here and open the doors, would you?"

The little man bobbed his head and quickly disappeared. Shortly afterwards the garage was filled with a low, clanking rumble. Looking behind the vehicles, Thane saw what he had thought was part of the wall lifting upwards, letting in light from the desert.

"Come over here, Thane." Thane walked up to Fletcher, by now completely bewildered by everything that was going on. Fletcher was holding an odd cylindrical device with two clips protruding from it on opposite sides. He took one of these clips and attached it to Thane's harness, then attached the other clip to the vehicle next to which they were standing. Only then did Thane notice that Fletcher was similarly attached.

"Going out, sir?"

A thick-bodied brick of a man hurried up to the pair while Thane was busy examining the contraption that attached him to the car. Thane didn't recognize him, which was odd because Thane knew pretty much everyone on the estate.

"Ah, Aramis. Yes. And it would be most helpful if you would take care of the driving."

The man bobbed his head. "Ah, I thought so sir, so I picked up the keys on my way."

"Very good, as always." Fletcher swung himself up into the vehicle, which was high off the ground due to the large tires that were needed for desert traction. "Come on Thane, no time to dally."

Glancing at Aramis, who had taken his position behind the wheel, Thane scrambled into the open-topped car, taking a seat behind Fletcher. Absently he noticed that the device attaching him to the car let out and reeled in a length of rope as he moved, and wondered what it was needed for.

"Here." Fletcher handed Thane a pair of thick goggles as the car rumbled to life. Thane realized that they were to protect the eyes from flying sand and quickly put them on.

"Where are we going, sir?" From the tone of the man's voice, Thane thought Aramis was nearly as confused as he was. He was oddly glad that he wasn't the only one left in the dark.

"Out past the oasis. From there our destination should be fairly clear."

Aramis nodded and the car started to move. Thane grabbed ahold of the vehicle's side, having never before ridden in a car, or any vehicle for that matter. The car moved from the smooth concrete of the garage's interior out onto the desert floor, crunching sand and hard red earth beneath its tires.

*SCREEE-EEE Aaarr...hissthump. hssThump. hsThump.
hsThump.*

It wasn't until the sound assaulted Thane's eardrums that he realized the walls of the garage had prevented him from hearing it. This time he knew it would have been agonizingly loud if not for the wind rushing past his ears. Looking out over the windshield he briefly noticed the well he had dozed against earlier before his attention was captured by something else entirely.

He hadn't been imaging that black shape earlier. Now it stood out in sharp relief against the red and blue of the desert floor and sky. Thane couldn't make out its exact shape, but he could see that it had four legs, and that it was limping slightly. That was what was making the screeching sound. Every time it used its right front leg to push itself forward the high-pitched noise would rend the desert air, and each time one of its feet struck the earth the ground would shake with an echoing thump.

"What is that?" Thane hadn't realized he'd thought the question aloud until Fletcher turned and smiled at him.

"That, dear Thane, is a Lightning Saix."

Thane stared at the thing, starting to make out red and silver details on the Saix's body. "But what is it doing here?"

"I assume that it is looking for this." Fletcher held up the gyro cap, which Thane hadn't noticed the man had brought. "As you can probably hear, the lack of this cap is causing it some minor problems."

An odd expression spread across Fletcher's face. It was unlike anything Thane had ever seen on the man's features. The corners of his lips curled upwards ever slightly, crinkling the skin at the outer corners of his eyes behind the goggles. Thane couldn't help thinking that the expression looked

vaguely evil.

Fletcher turned back to the front as Aramis drove the car onwards. They were fast coming up on the Saix, allowing Thane a look at the triangular shape of the lowered head. He stared at the Zoid as they drove past it, noticing the aerodynamic shape of the body, and the fact there was a spot at the middle of the right foreleg where it was clear that a gyro cap was indeed missing.

The Lightning Saix turned its head to watch the trio as they passed by, clearly tracking them with its green eyes. It opened its mouth and a rattling hiss issued forth, clearly a warning. Thane wondered if it was looking into the car for its missing cap, but Fletcher had hidden it again even if that was what the Saix sought a glimpse of. Either not finding what it was looking for or not thinking them a threat, the Saix once more turned its head forward and continued to plod onward.

Aramis turned the car around once they were fully past the Saix and sped up to once more draw level with its head. Once there he slowed the car so that they were pacing the Saix.

Unsure whether or not he was actually allowed to ask, but unable to hold in the question, Thane asked, "What are we doing, sir?"

This time Fletcher didn't even turn to look at him. "We're capturing the Saix, of course."

Thane wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but didn't say anything more. In front of him, Fletcher took what looked like a miniature bazooka from somewhere and aimed it at the Saix. The thing fired with a loud bang, and Thane watched as the missile flew over the Saix's neck, trailing a length of cable. As the weight at the end dropped the cable came to rest across the Saix's neck, causing the end to swing up and around until the hooked end caught on something and held fast, securing the line.

Fletcher nodded in satisfaction and set the launcher aside after securing the other end of the line to a thick metal pole in the middle of the car that Thane hadn't previously noticed. He grabbed a pair of thick gloves, assumingly from the same place the launcher had come from, and put them on. "I'm going across. Thane, you follow me. Aramis, keep the car steady if you will."

With that he transferred his tether hook from the car to the line before grabbing hold of the thick cable with both hands and swinging his legs up one at a time so that they crossed over the top. Thane watched in amazement as the man began to quickly and easily propel himself along the line.

"I'm supposed to follow him along *that*?" Thane hardly thought he had the skill to do such a thing, though he finally realized the purpose of the harness.

"Yes. Now get yer skinny butt goin'."

Thane spared a wide-eyed glance at Aramis, but knew there was nothing for it. Either he followed Fletcher or suffered the consequences when he got back. After that evil smirk Fletcher had shown earlier Thane didn't really want to think about what would happen if he disobeyed. He swallowed around the thick lump in his throat, then followed Fletcher's example and hooked himself to the line. Shaking nervously he grabbed hold of the cable and swung himself up.

The most disorienting thing about moving along the line was being upside down. Thane quickly realized that he couldn't look in front of himself unless he wanted to be violently ill, so he tucked his chin to his chest and let his hands guide the way. But this was easier said than done. The harsh steel wires that made up the cable soon showed Thane why Fletcher had worn gloves. They bit into his palms and fingers with every movement, making him hiss in pain. His legs didn't fare much better. The thin cloth of the pants he had been wearing was quickly eaten away, allowing the cable to cut into the soft

flesh behind his knees.

Thane ignored the pain as well as he could, knowing that it would only end once he made it across. He grabbed his bottom lip between his teeth and bit down, using that pain as a distraction. He was concentrating so hard that he didn't realize he'd made it to the other end of the line until on his next pull he wound up smacking his head against the armor of the Saix's neck.

He opened his eyes and looked up. He couldn't see Fletcher at the moment. The only things filling his gaze were the top of the Saix's enormous neck and the cloudless sky above. Groaning, he carefully transferred his aching hands to grooves in the black armor and then gently swung his legs down from the cable. Glancing around he saw Fletcher's harness hook attached to what appeared to be a spike driven into the Zoid's armor. Thane flinched in sympathy for the Saix, but transferred his own hook to the spike as well.

Scrambling up the side of the neck earned Thane a more stable perch. He looked towards the Saix's head and caught sight of Fletcher. The man was crouched at the junction between head and neck, reaching forward as if he was looking for something. Thane carefully moved towards him, always keeping one hand on the Saix's neck.

Fletcher glanced back and motioned Thane forward. "We're looking for the canopy release." The man had to shout above the wind and the noise of the Zoid's movements.

"What's a canopy release?"

Fletcher looked at Thane as if he was the world's largest idiot. "It opens the cockpit. Feel around for a button or panel of some kind."

Thane nodded, still not quite understanding, and reached his hand forward to rest against the back of the Saix's head.

Help me.

The metallic voice echoing in his head nearly dislodged Thane from his perch. He stole a glance at Fletcher, but the man was undisturbed, still groping around the Saix's head in a determined fashion. He shook his head and went back to his search.

Help me.

Thane wasn't quite as shocked this time, but the voice in his head was still disturbing. He didn't know what to do and didn't want to alert Fletcher to the fact that he may have just gone crazy. Not coming up with any other options, he muttered under his breath, "who are you?"

I am the Lightning Saix.

Well that was certainly odd. Thane almost sat back on his heels before remembering where he was and that he needed to at least pretend to look for the canopy release. "You're what?"

The Lightning Saix.

"You mean this giant thing that I'm currently sitting on top of?"

Yes.

This day just kept getting weirder and weirder. "And you want me to help you?"

Yes.

No beating around the bush with this guy, apparently. "And how am I supposed to do that?"

Retrieve my cap.

So Fletcher had been right about the gyro cap. "Any more specifics you can give me? Like where it is?"

There were no words this time, but a series of pictures flashed through Thane's mind. Among the images was a view of the gyro cap stuffed into a pack on Fletcher's back that Thane had noticed. There was also an image of the canopy release and a plan to get the cap back. "I hope you're right about this."

Thane scooted a bit across the Saix's neck before looking underneath an overhang in the armor. There was the release, just as the Saix had shown him. He straightened a bit and yelled toward Fletcher, "Hey! I found it!"

The man quickly turned and came towards him, an eager glint in his eye. "Where? Show me!"

Thane moved back as far as he could and motioned under the overhang. "In there."

Fletcher maneuvered himself so that he could get under the overhang. Thane couldn't see what the man was doing, but assumed he was trying to activate the release. After a moment he straightened up, a sour look on his face.

"No good. It won't budge."

"Maybe we need to put something heavy on top of it to add more pressure when it's pushed."

Fletcher glowered at Thane. "And did you bring anything heavy with you?"

Thane shook his head and shrugged. "It was just a thought."

Fletcher sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, well then." He crouched there for a moment, contemplating. Finally he swung the pack from his back and unzipped it,

pulling out the gyro cap. He handed the thing to Thane. "Use this to push on it. I'll go up and see if a little upward pressure on the canopy itself won't help open this thing."

Thane nodded and managed to hold back his grin until Fletcher had turned away. He couldn't believe that the Saix's plan had worked so well. He crawled under the overhang just as the Saix had shown him, clutching the gyro cap. "Now what?"

More images flashed through Thane's mind, but he was ready for them this time. When they had subsided he reached down to the clip on his harness and unhooked himself from the safety line. He wiggled a bit, wedging himself further under the overhang, then tapped three times on the black armor.

The sudden lurching motion caught Thane completely off-guard. He swallowed and scabbled around with his right hand, trying to find something to hold onto. His hand met only smooth metal as the Saix began to thrash, tossing its head this way and that. But the overhang was small and Thane had wedged himself well, keeping him secure. He heard thumps and scraping from outside, though they were muffled. He pulled his chin in to his chest and squeezed his eyes shut, knowing he had no choice but to wait out the storm.

Thane didn't know how long the Saix continued to thrash. All he knew was that he had an abominable headache once it stopped. He groaned but didn't move from his position, not sure whether or not the crazy movements would start up again.

It's alright. You can come out now.

Wincing at his stiff necks and ravaged hands and knees, Thane slowly crawled from the overhang. He looked out at the surroundings, eyes widening as he realized he had no idea where they were and that Fletcher and Aramis were

nowhere to be seen. The Saix had stopped moving altogether and as he straightened up Thane could feel that it was definitely favoring the leg missing the cap.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" The Saix rumbled an affirmative, not needing Thane to explain his meaning. "Will putting the cap back on the joint fix it?"

No. There is too much damage. Putting the cap back on will only serve to delay full failure of the joint.

"Oh." Thane looked down at the cap in his hands. "But I can at least do that much for you, right?"

I suppose. The Saix lowered itself to the ground, laying its head flat between its forepaws so that Thane could hop to the ground. As Thane's feet hit the ground he realized that they were no longer in the depths of the desert. The earth beneath his feet was soft and tending more towards brown than red.

"Where are we?"

The Southern border of La'Rousse, about eighty miles north of where we first met. Union Forest lies about twenty miles northwest of here.

Thane wasn't sure what to make of that, but was comforted by the fact that the Saix seemed to have a good sense of navigation. He quickly walked around the Saix's foreleg to the place where the cap would go. He examined the joint and found that the few ridges on the inside of the cap corresponded to ridges where the cap would be positioned and set about putting it back in place.

"Won't Fletcher come after you again when you take me back to the estate?"

The Saix lifted its head and looked at Thane over its leg. *You want to go back?*

“Where else would I go? The estate is the only place I’ve ever known.”

Well... I thought we might go somewhere together.

It was the first time Thane had heard the Saix sound unsure. He pushed the cap securely into place and looked up at the emerald green eyes. “Why?”

The Saix didn’t say anything for some time, seemingly unsure.

I was told that you were of the Sayre bloodline. All of my partners have hailed from that family, but I was left alone when my last pilot died. I thought that perhaps, after so long, I had finally found a new companion.

The Saix sounded sad, as if finding Thane had been the driving force behind all of its recent actions. Thane couldn’t help the warm swelling he felt in his chest. It didn’t matter that the Saix was a giant metal fighting machine. It wanted him, and no one had ever wanted him before.

He smiled and stood, resting his hand on the Saix’s leg. “Well I can’t say as I have any particular desire to go back to the estate.” He didn’t mention that he had been a slave there. The Saix didn’t seem to know that detail and it was something that Thane would prefer to forget. “And who knows, it might be fun to see more of the world than that little slice of desert.”

The Saix rumbled in what Thane thought was a happy fashion and moved its head forward, nudging him with its blunt nose. *Thank you.*

Thane shrugged. “I do have one complaint, though.”

The Saix tilted its head to the side quizzically.

“If we’re going to be roaming far and wide I’d really prefer

not to be wedged in that space at the back of your head.”

The Saix let out a soft rattle that could have been laughter. *But of course.* It then lowered its head to the ground once more, the opening of its canopy accompanied by the hiss of compressed air escaping to the atmosphere. *Will the cockpit suit you?*

No longer encumbered by the gyro cap, Thane climbed over the Saix’s leg to get a look inside its head. There was a dark leather seat surrounded by control panels. Hung from the seat were straps that were obviously meant to secure the pilot. Carefully Thane lowered himself into the cockpit, settling into the chair.

The canopy closed above Thane as he carefully fitted the pilot straps about himself. It was a bit difficult due to the fact that he hadn’t yet taken off the harness Fletcher had had him put on, but he didn’t want to deal with that until he could do something about his hands.

Finally fully settled, Thane took the time to more fully admire the cockpit. Apart from the control panels and the faint emerald tint to pretty much everything, it felt as if he was in the open air. He could look up and see the sky overhead, or look to his right and see the earth stretching off the distance. The only place he couldn’t see was directly behind and directly underneath the Saix. He couldn’t help his low whistle of appreciation.

I’m glad you like it.

“It’s amazing.” He admired the view for a bit longer then settled back into the seat. “So, where are we going?”

Ultimately it is up to you, but I would suggest Union Forest. If we’re lucky I’ll still have an old friend living there who could fix my leg. I also don’t think I can go much farther than that with its current condition.

Thane smirked. "Well, then I guess we're off to Union Forest." He wanted to pat the Saix, but couldn't find a flat surface that was devoid of controls. Shrugging, he settled for resting his hand gently on one of the thruster controls.

As you wish.

There was a smile in the Saix's voice. Thane could hear it, and he couldn't help his widening grin. "Oh, by the way, do you have a name? I've just been thinking of you as 'the Saix,' but that feels weird now that we're partners."

There was a happy flash of colors in Thane's mind.

You can call me Kai.

(For more visit <http://lightning-saix.deviantart.com> or <http://www.fanfiction.net/~lightningsaix>)



Moment of Silence

wolfsilver-x.deviantart.com

War Games

Chapter One

The following takes place in **ZAC 2033**, during the events of the **First Central Continent War** (ZAC 2029-2039) of **OJR Battle Story** continuity

Excerpt from *“An Oral History of the Sniper”*

First Edition, Delpoi Archives

Nimbus, Albane W.

The introduction of the Zoic Android to the modern-day battlefield set the mark for future warfare and made many realize the essential role that these biomechanical behemoths had in warfare. Cheap to produce due to their organic origins, as well as easy to learn how to pilot, the Zoid slowly crept its way into the arsenals of both the Helic Republic and the Zenebas Empire during the First Central Continent War. Eventually the inception of the Zoid culminated in a boom during the Human Arrival, which sparked a new arms race as each side developed one powerful weapon after the other. Each one more deadly than the one before.

The human ship that crash-landed on Zi in ZAC 2029, ‘Globally 3,’ was one of seventeen Globally-class ships that had left the human homeworld of Earth. A destructive and nuclear ‘world civil war’ had left the planet near uninhabitable and the Globally ships were part of a cooperative mission by all the major powers of Earth to set aside their differences and locate planets capable of supporting life. Though it was through accidental mutiny onboard between the ship’s military staff and some merchants that led to the crash-landing of the ship on Zi, ironically enough it was perfect for the endangered human race. Humans and Zoidians share at least 98.79% (to the tenth percentile, Edwards, 189) of their DNA, and Earth and Zi have similar geographical and to a certain extent;

climatic features. Over one half of the Globally 3’s passengers were people with backgrounds in various fields of technological disciplines, and many were also associated with the military as well; due to the world civil war’s conscription policy.

Attributed to Zi’s small size and having the majority of its population located in a single Pangaea-style supercontinent, globalization had already been achieved in the planet prior to the arrival of humans. This made the introduction of human culture that much easier as multiple facets of the human lifestyle proved popular amongst the Zoidians. As the second year since the Human Arrival ended, more than half the planet already spoke the primary lingua Franca of humanity, English, having had replaced the traditional Ancient Zoidian. Humanity’s traits were being integrated into Zi itself and the armies took advantage of this, using human technology to upgrade the development of Zoids. Prior to the Arrival, many military analysts did not consider Zoids as quintessential to the battlefield and that they should merely serve as mass-produced armor transport in the form of smaller Zoids like the early Garius or Glidoler units. It was with human-pioneered tactics and systems that Zoids evolved from cheap substitutes to fully-fledged combat machines and made them what they are today.

As the Zoid concept slowly became the core of every military, the humans furthered their influence by introducing more concepts to Zoid warfare including squad systems, air support, and proper rank hierarchies. But by far one of the most revolutionary concepts that humanity introduced was the concept of the sniper, the stealthy role of support played by a lone Zoid. Whilst all those human contributions listed above already existed loosely in the Zoidian armies, the sniper was a wholly new idea, a covert agent who could support combat operations by delivering long-range precision fire - creating casualties and slowing movement, playing an elaborate game of cat and mouse with the enemy.

1810 hours, Sep 7th

Khamer-River town Yeil, Delpoi

“Mark.”

Crack! The rifle mounted on the tip of the Guysack’s tail recoiled as the bullet left the chamber, soaring into the air. The spent shell casing burst out of the weapon’s chamber as it cocked back and fell onto the ground, the five-foot long lead bouncing off the sandy surface as it gracefully descended. Beside the tail rifle was a cockpit, mounted on the tail as well and inside, a Zoids pilot, one of the few elite markswomen of the 16th Sisters Sniper Battalion of the Republican Army.

“Damn, missed that little critter,” Sergeant Ibrik Scylla muttered as she surveyed the battlefield ahead. The x4 setting on her ceiling-mounted field glasses magnified the war-torn situation of the Khamer-River town. Explosions came from every direction as street-to-street fighting erupted and aerial Zoids carpet-bombed the entire town. Behind the burnt-out rubble of what was, moments ago, a monastery laid a surprisingly resilient Zenebas Iguan. Ibrik’s brow furrowed as she flipped the switch to cock the bolt and load another cartridge into the rifle’s chamber.

“Lucky little bastard, it’s like you’re invincible.” She whispered softly as she switched the field glasses setting back to scope mode and brought her eyes closer to the device, “But this time...hah, this time you’re not getting away from the inevitable.”

“When have I heard that before,” a sarcastic voice muttered over the intercom as it crackled.

Scylla grinned. The source of the childish comment was her

partner, and her current spotter, Sergeant Joanna Don. The intercom crackled as Ibrik held on the voice-over button, relaying a comeback to Joanna, who was down in the main cockpit of the Guysack, acting as the pilot of the Zoid.

“Every time I scored a kill,” she retorted, “I hope you have your visual settings on plus five.”

“I’ve got them on plus *six* just to see if you’re lying again this time,” Joanna replied with a snicker.

“That was a definite kill!”

“Here we go again.”

“You just couldn’t see it cause you were too busy dealing with that AZ rifle; I saw that Saicurtis blow up in mid-air. From *my* round!”

“Uh-huh, so it wasn’t some Cannon Tortoise’s anti-air guns?” Joanna answered with a chuckle, “Please, what are the chances of hitting a target in mid-air?”

“Five to none, don’t be jealous if you don’t have the talent.” Ibrik said, quoting from an old Wind Tribe idiom.

“And which one of us has the higher number of kills again?”

“Shut up, if I kill this idiot over here, we’ll be on par.”

“If. And that’s only if I count that Saicurtis.”

“Shut up.”

Ibrik heard a soft laugh over the intercom and then it was dead. *Peace and silence at last.* The Iguan was still there, squatted underneath all that debris, waiting for some

unsuspecting Republican Zoids to pass by so that it could ambush them. The poor fool, blissfully ignorant of that its very spot was its own grave. At her current range, Ibrik did not even require the participation of her spotter for a firing solution to calculate the angle of her bullet. Ibrik smiled to herself as she enjoyed the sensation of challenge right before a hit, she was a trained Zoid sniper and was proud of it too.

The concept of a 'sniper' in the battlefield was relatively new to Zoid warfare. One of the many introductory concepts of the humans after they landed in ZAC 2029, snipers had only just been recently assimilated into the modern Zoid army. Prior to this there were not even rough predecessors to it, sure there were units that served as overwatch to eliminate unseen enemies or potential threats, but it was more of a role than a specialty. It was only after Zoid warfare fully evolved that the importance of a sniper's role came into the spotlight. The Helic Republic was the first to attempt this, and the Empire followed soon after. Ibrik and Joanna were one of the many two-member 'sister-squads' of the 16th Sisters Sniper Battalion, an all-female sniper battalion that operated as individual squads going where they were needed rather than as a single unit.

It was the power of intimidation and fear of the unknown that made snipers so successful. Psychological warfare was a new innovation as well, and the inability to pin down a sniper could cause significant dents in a soldier's morale. Enemy soldiers hated them, calling them 'cheaters' or 'dishonorable,' unwilling to accept the changing status quo of war on Zi. Zoid warfare itself wasn't that old, having started roughly twenty-years ago, but already infantry were beginning to accept its place in the armed forces. Snipers added a whole new layer to the battlefield, a league of trained sharpshooters whose job was to keep its friendlies close and

its enemies closer.

This was precisely what Sergeant Ibrik was attempting as she set her sights on the Iguan. Her first shot had fallen off the left by a few degrees; she had missed the minute of angle window. Because she had timed her shot to coincide with the explosion of a falling bomb, the Iguan had not noticed and still kept its entrenched position, most likely still waiting for an opportunity for an ambush. Ibrik was not going to let that happen. Adjusting the rifle by shifting her gyroscopic control, she felt the whole cockpit veer to the right as she lined up the crosshairs projected on her cockpit's screen with the Iguan, aiming directly for the clamshell canopy.

Ibrik let out a breath as she placed her finger on the trigger. At this range, it was almost impossible to miss. Solid rounds always acted like that. Unlike the standard-issue Guysacks, sniper Guysacks had their tail rifles modified, being rebuilt with a cockpit for a sniper to be placed on its mounting bracket to its right. Their rounds were also B-30 heavy armour-piercing centerfire rounds that could endure long distances and not compromise on accuracy, contrary to the standard beam fire. Beam fire was often unpredictable and could disperse due to Zi's natural electromagnetic field if fired too far. Solid bullets didn't have this weakness, but were more susceptible to gravity. It didn't matter much to Ibrik however; even beam fire would not disperse at this distance. 580 yards weren't much to a sniper as skilled as her. She wasn't even going to bother masking her shot with a bomb's detonation.

Checking once again that the on-screen crosshair on the monitor lined up, Ibrik took a deep breath. Her index finger lightly placed some pressure on the trigger as her entire palm gripped the control stick.

“Mark.”

She squeezed the trigger and felt the whole cockpit shudder as the rifle fired, launching the hard-nosed projectile into the air. A pocket watch that hung from the fuel indicator dial of the cockpit, a present from Joanna for her 20th birthday, swung like a pendulum with the force. Zooming into the Iguan with her field glasses, it took only a split second before she could spot the round smashing into the clam-like cockpit, tearing apart the armor with devastating accuracy and toppling the whole Zoid over. Ibrik watched with something similar to pride as the dust kicked in the air as the Zoid lost its footing, crashing down onto the ground with a thunderous clatter. Fire and smoke fumed from the cockpit, and Ibrik pushed the glasses back onto its slot on the roof of the canopy, before reclining back on her chair.

“Bulls-eye.”

“You didn’t mask the shot?” Joanna asked in shock.

“Yeah....so? Not as though I was going to miss...”

“Moons Almighty,” was Joanna’s sighing answer before tapping could be heard over the line, “I’ll catalog that on the computer’s kill record.”

“And the Saicurtis one?”

“Over my dead bo-”

“Tell you what,” Ibrik interrupted, “If on the next mission I bring down two in a row,” she offered temptingly, “you catalog that Saicurtis kill.”

“Next mission’s your turn to be the spotter.”

“Ok then, next-next mission.”

A mild pause.

“Deal.”

Ibrik grinned as she placed her hands folded back on the base of her skull. Surviving another day on the battlefield always lifted up one’s spirits. To Ibrik, war resembled a gambling game of some sort...where you took your chances even after you’ve won once. Where you keep doing it over and over again just for the thrill. Ibrik stole a look at the pocket watch which hung on with its chain and saw that there were only three more minutes remaining on their patrol rotation before they could return back to their base headquarters, codenamed ‘*Hassin*’, just twenty kilometers south from their current location within an improvised spider hole.

“I need to grab some grub and shower,” Ibrik said aloud as she heard her gut grumble. *Three minutes*, she thought, *Maybe I can get another unlucky Imperial bastard*. She pulled down the field glasses in a rush again, scanning the burning husks of former buildings. Shards of glass and bomb craters filled the streets. The bodies of both soldiers and innocent civilians littered the streets. There was even the monocoque frame of a downed Storch stuck in between a building. Ibrik increased her resolution again.

It took only a moment before she caught the glint of a Zoid’s armor as it approached them. Her lips curled upwards as she switched the setting to fire mode and turned the safety off. The miniature screen beside her gun control flashed ‘*CLEAR*’ as she gripped the fire control.

“Joanna, three o’ clock low.” she reported.

"Where? I can't see," Joanna replied, "You got a visual?"

"Affirmative. One of the Zenebas newer Zoids, that gorilla one. Three of them."

"They call 'em Hammer Rocks, or so I hear." Joanna replied as she tapped several keys, "We better bug out, ain't no way I'm going against one, let alone three of them. This isn't part of our job description."

"No wait, hold on," Ibrik spoke softly over the intercom, licking her lips, "We might have a chance here." She angled her weapon towards the Hammer Rock at the end of the spear formation that they were in, the one furthest back.

"Might? That's a pretty bloody loose statement," Joanna answered, "No hell no, we pull back." She began to shift the Guysack out of the foxhole it was nestled in, kicking up dirt in the air and dropping off the rubble that was on its back, serving as its camouflage in the urban environment.

"Joanna, stop damnit! You're reveal our position!" Ibrik exclaimed as the crosshair on her monitor shook, "I said stop! Just wait ok, I can handle this!" Joanna reluctantly brought the Guysack to a stop at Ibrik's outburst. The crosshair steadied.

"By the Moons!" Joanna yelled over the intercom, making Ibrik wince at her roaring voice, "Two minutes, that's all I'm giving you."

"I can handle this," Ibrik reaffirmed as she angled her shot higher to make up for the distance. 875 yards; according to the tachymeter. She cross-referenced it with the altimeter just to confirm before getting ready for the shot. Overhead, she could see several Storches dispersing from their formations

in the sky. A signal that they were preparing to unload their bombs. That was all Ibrik needed to know when to fire.

"Mark."

Just as the Storches dropped their bombs on the riverside town, creating massive craters and death in their wake, Ibrik fired. The shot fired just as the fireworks began. Smoke blossomed ahead as the ground shook and Ibrik struggled as she tried to see if she had hit her target. Not even the Rock's armored helm could have saved it from her round if it came into contact with the Zoid. Theoretically at least, it should have pierced clean through the enemy Zoid. Ibrik held her breath.

"Damn smoke's everywhere, can't see nothing," Joanna muttered under her breath. Ibrik didn't comment, despite her mutual agreement. The sounds of battle were beginning to fade away into the distance now, as was the smoke. As loose soil floated down from the air and the ash began to disperse, Ibrik spotted her target.

"One down, two to go," she reported over the intercom, a smile plastered on her face.

"Hnn," Joanna grudgingly agreed.

Ibrik kept her eyes trained on her field glasses to see if the other two Zoids had spotted her. They hadn't. *Dolts probably still think that a bomb shard or something caught their poor friend over there.* The Imperial Zoids were standing around their fallen comrade in arms; they were probably having a conversation over the intercom. The thought that a sniper was meters away, watching their every move had not even occurred to them yet. It was something Ibrik used to her advantage, namely, the element of surprise.

"Mark," she said as another explosive dropped. The gun let out a crack as the round exited the barrel and brought down the second Hammer Rock on the far left. It collapsed onto the street, armor splintering from such a fall. The third Hammer Rock's pilot would probably realize by now that a hidden marksman was the one responsible but Ibrik wouldn't give the bastard the chance to come to that epiphany. She slid her crosshairs towards the final Zoid to unload the last round - before it did the completely unexpected.

"The klutz is charging towards us!" Joanna shouted as the Hammer Rock did just that.

"Yeah, no shit," Ibrik replied sarcastically as she tried to steady her crosshair for a clean shot on the rumbling Rock. The Zoid was shaking too much in its stampede for Ibrik to get one in, if her round hit that thing's 60mm chest armor, it would only give away her position. *Imbecile probably thinks we're somewhere else, probably running in our direction to find cover. Only thing he's going to find here is us.* But Ibrik didn't find comfort in that fact. In a direct melee confrontation, a nimble Zoid like the Guysack had little chance against other Zoids, even small-sized ones like the Hammer Rock.

"Curse him," Ibrik sighed with defeat, "Guess we're done here. Better pull back before he spots us."

"*I can handle this,*" Joanna mockingly imitated as she reversed the Zoid, "Deploying smoke dischargers."

Ibrik pushed her field glasses back into their proper place above as she gazed at the Guysack from her elevated position. The tanks filled with ink-like smoke on the sides of the Zoid unlatched themselves from the main torso, the pins flying off with a hiss as the tanks fell on the ground, releasing black smoke in every direction. The gas melded with the

smoke that lingered to create an even thicker fog around their Guysack. She felt her entire cockpit tremor as the Guysack slowly crept out of its makeshift foxhole. A cloud of darkness surrounded Ibrik's canopy from all sides, Joanna were her eyes now. But she still had her ears. And they were telling her something wasn't right.

"Joanna, I can hear it. Louder," Ibrik's eyes widened, "It's running! The wretch is running towards us!"

Joanna spat out an Ancient Zoidian swear word over the intercom. The Guysack's frame jerked violently as Joanna pushed the Zoid harder on reverse gear. Ibrik felt more shudders, it sounded like the whole Zoid was going to fall apart as her cockpit trembled. She could feel vibrations, but it didn't seem as though they were moving. They were remaining motionless as far as she could tell.

"Joanna, what's going on down-??"

"Stuck!" Joanna answered disjointedly, "Damn thing's stuck!"

Ibrik heard the engine whirr as it tried to bring the Guysack out of its ditch. Peering down, the sniper could tell that the Zoid's spindly feet had been caught in the wire of the ground. They had dug too deep, digging up the infrastructure of the town's electrical cable network. Sparks began to fly everywhere as the cables became more and more entangled with the struggling Zoid. Ibrik could have sworn that the Zoid was shrieking in agony.

By now the fumes from the smoke dischargers was beginning to disperse, its deployment ineffective and Ibrik could make out the rampaging silhouette of the Hammer Rock through the smoke. It still hadn't noticed them yet, but it was only a matter of time. She considered her two options. One was

abandoning the sinking ship. And the other, well... Ibrik took a brief second to ponder them before pulling down her field glasses and setting her sights on the Hammer Rock.

"To hell with it," she whispered under her breath as she doped the scope, lowering the resolution so the enemy fit the frame. Once that had been done, she attempted to align her shaky crosshair with the equally shaky Hammer Rock. Sweat poured down her forehead as her fingers tensed over the gun grip. Her eyebrows arched together like a bat's wings and when she saw her window of opportunity, she fired.

BLAM! The bullet flew towards the Hammer Rock with resounding speed as Ibrik spotted its point of impact. The left shoulder pad of the Hammer Rock. Dust blew around that area as chinks of armor fell down. It was a loose shot though, a near miss almost. The pilot probably didn't even feel that and most likely attributed it to a shard of debris or something.

"Joanna, how are we doing down there?" Ibrik asked as she chambered another round.

"Getting there..." was Joanna's response through gritted teeth. Ibrik made out the snapping of some wires as Joanna used the Guysack's jaws to pull the wires out from underneath it.

Ibrik returned her attention back to the Hammer Rock. The distance was closing between them. It was only a matter of time before it noticed them. Ibrik pulled the trigger.

As the round flew into the air, the Hammer Rock descended down a crater in the road, making it narrowly miss the intended victim. But the Hammer Rock had spotted the glint of the scope now. It knew where its target was now. The

element of surprise was gone.

"Ah, Moons." Ibrik chambered another round and fired. The round bounced right off the Hammer Rock's torso as the Imperial Zoid began to fire its beam vulcans. Ibrik felt dizzy as the Guysack trembled even more, making her job that much harder. Smog kicked in the air as the Hammer Rock emerged from the foxhole, guns blazing. The deafening sound of the beam vulcans rang in Ibrik's ears as she struggled to remain focused on the target.

Focus. She fired another bullet. The round harmlessly missed the Zoid. At any rate at least the Hammer Rock wasn't faring any better. Its constant running was painfully decreasing its accuracy as its rounds zipped past the Guysack. But its purpose wasn't to hit, as Ibrik realized when the Hammer Rock closed the distance and lifted its massive fists into the air before bringing them down on the Guysack...only to distract.

The grinding of metal screeched through Ibrik's ears as she gritted her teeth. The knuckles of the Hammer Rock had crashed down with an unrelenting fury. Joanna had reacted almost instantly and was attempting to hold the Rock at bay with the claws of the Guysack, the pincers encircled around the Rock's fists, keeping them in mid-bay. She wouldn't hold out for long though, Ibrik could tell, as she saw the limbs connecting the claws with the main body of the Guysack were already beginning to bend with the strain. The Hammer Rock seemed to be mocking them, its massive fuselage towering theirs as the pilot increased the hydraulic strength of its arms. The pincers caved in and shattered to pieces as the Hammer Rock crushed the Zoid's arms. Flames and sparks flew from every direction.

"Hell!" Ibrik heard Joanna scream over the intercom. Ibrik

braced for cover as the Hammer Rock opened its right fist wide open and brought it over the tail of the Guysack, holding it in its menacing, vice-like grip.

“He’s got me!” Ibrik cried. The cockpit shook violently as Ibrik’s head clattered against the walls of it, her aviator-style balaclava being her skull’s only protection, “Ugly bastard’s got me!” Alarms inside the cockpit blared loudly, telling her what she already knew.

“Shoot that prick!” Joanna roared, “Shoot him!”

“Can’t...” Ibrik attempted to say as she gripped the gun control as though her life depended on it, “Can’t...aim...” The on-screen crosshair shuddered as the Hammer Rock’s face came closer.

“Aim, what the hell do you – just shoot the asshole!” Joanna shrieked, her panic doing little to aid Ibrik.

The whole Zoid rumbled as Ibrik tightened her eyes. There it was; the ugly snickering face of the Hammer Rock. Cold, heartless. Ibrik couldn’t make out the Zoidian figure inside. And it was Zoidian. *Hhn, Zoidian.* The thought had never occurred to her before. Snipers weren’t like that. They weren’t like ordinary soldiers who had face-to-face confrontations with their enemies. Snipers were detached – unconnected, their every engagement not personal. *Until now.* Ibrik looked right into the eyes of the son of a bitch and pulled the trigger without remorse.

At near point-blank range the round went off, hurling the Zoids away from each other like opposing magnetic forces. The Rock’s hand detached from the Guysack’s tail as the round exploded right in its face, shattering the canopy of the gorilla-type Zoid in a blinding flash. The Imperial

Zoid staggered back, its arms flailing uselessly as its head exploded, scattering shards of armor before falling prostrate onto the earth in a shattering racket.

Ibrik herself had not been spared from the shot as the entirety of the Guysack’s tail had twisted all the way back to an angle of one-thirty degrees. The rapid-fire motion tossed Ibrik back and had she not been wearing her safety harness; her back might have snapped at the force. White-hot smoke sifted from the barrel of the gun and there were spider-web cracks on Ibrik’s orange canopy from the kinetic force. Her rifle’s scope was completely broken as well, and the image projected on her field glasses by it flickered with static. The once gray tail of the armless Zoid was now covered in soot and ash.

Ibrik struggled to catch her breath in between wheezing gasps. The hydrostatic shock had been staggering, jolting Ibrik’s every sense. Gripping her forehead in between her hands, she wiped off the dirty sweat and blinked her eyes multiple times, as if to verify whether or not she had just shot a Hammer Rock head-first with her sniper rifle. Her pocket watch had fallen off from its place and now rested in her lap. The adrenaline inside her was still pumping and she felt oddly snared and claustrophobic in the tight confinements of her cockpit. In one swift motion, she reached out to the cockpit lever and pulled it, resulting in her cockpit’s canopy opening up with a whirr.

Fresh air filled her nostrils and she took a deep breath in relief. She clenched and unclenched her fists, doing a routine physical check and noting that her suit’s neck brace had snapped during the engagement. She uncurled her fingers and took off her standard-issue pilot balaclava as she observed the mechanical carcass of the Hammer Rock. The flames from the shot were still burning and the prints

in the mud where its fists had once been still visible. There were even a few lingering fragments of the Rock's armor still falling from the air like rain from heaven. Ibrik quickly turned her gaze away when she heard a crackle over the intercom.

"L-Le-kzzzz-t's not ever do that again," Joanna said over the fuzzy intercom.

"Yeah, let's not." Ibrik replied.

"Look at that." Joanna whistled, "Look at that, Ibrik... that's what we're gonna be one day if you keep this reckless behavior up."

Ibrik glanced downwards at the Hammer Rock once more. The corpse of the former Zoid was smoldering, its armor literally melting from the heat of the burning engine. A moment ago when the Imperial Zoid was dominating them, when it had prepared for the coup de grace, Ibrik spotted the silhouette of the pilot inside. Nothing personal, just doing my job, seemed to be what he or she was saying. As though the justification that this was your 'occupation' excluded it from what it is about to commit. Murder, pure and simple. Ibrik felt apathetic as she looked at the Zoid. She tried to sympathize, tried to feel sorry. After a while she stopped struggling to, and fell back on her seat. *Nothing personal*, she thought to herself.

"That was close."

"Definitely too close." Ibrik ratified.

After a second of silence, they both went back to work. Joanna continued dragging what was left of their Guysack out of the foxhole while Ibrik attempted to contact HQ for

aid. Both of them had already forgotten about the kill score by this point.

2122 hours, Sep 7th

TOC, Bivouac *Hassin*

Base of the 5th Republican Zoic Android Brigade Group

Twenty kilometers southeast of *Yeil*

"Sir, authenticated and coded telegram Aveq-119 received," a radioman reported as he tapped several keys on the keyboard, "Translating."

Lieutenant Colonel Grant Wash of the 6th Zoic Android Assault Battalion (6th ZABN) strode over the radioman and reached out for the paper just as it exited the telegraph. *Aveq-119?* The lieutenant colonel frowned, recognizing the alphanumeric code for an executive order. Tearing the flimsy paper from the machine, he then walked over to the ray of light from an overhead halogen lamp and narrowed his eyes, trying to read the fine black print.

"By the almighty Moons of the heavens," his superior, Colonel Shaddai-Av Amadeus swore as he flipped through the stack of telegrams received in the last two hours, "These report circulations drive me up the wall. Look at this one, Grant. 'Republic Supercannon prototype.' Why are we wasting our taxes on this unnecessary bull? And this one, reports about that Gambino guy, the one whose men defected? Honorable suicide my ass."

The colonel paused briefly and glanced over at his subordinate when he realized that he might as well be talking to a stone wall. The man was soaked in tense perspiration and his eyes darted across the page like a machine-gun

unloading its bandoliers. Amadeus paced over to his side.

“Lt. Colonel, you alright?” Colonel Amadeus asked, his eyes suspiciously squinting as he spotted Wash’s hands shaking and intense focus on the paper in his clammy grip, “What’s that you have there, let me see.”

The lieutenant colonel complied without a word, handing over paper with several pictures attached via paperclip on it. Colonel Amadeus held it firmly with one gloved hand and scanned the page with his eagle-like eyes. By the time he had completed the first paragraph and had a peek through those pictures, a look of fear had already crept onto his face. Fear. On the colonel’s face, it was nearly unheard of. Even the radioman took notice and turned from his post, his expression one of anxiety.

“Moons almighty,” Amadeus whispered. He shared a look with Lt. Colonel Wash. Wash nodded. Amadeus proceeded to adjust his tight collar. “I heard one of them generals talking about this before – this Zenebas punk. If he’s coming...then what of our operation?” He took another fleeting look at the attached pictures, satellite photos of Republican Zoids laid to waste, their biomechanical body parts visible with the resolution, strewn across the entire city whilst the city’s buildings and infrastructure remained fairly intact.

“They call him ‘Kreep,’ according to what I heard,” Lt. Colonel Wash mentioned, “Comes from that old myth, sir. Have you ever heard of it, sir?”

“Kreep, the worm who ate the wicked.” Colonel Amadeus replied, familiar with the ancient folktale, “If he’s already past the Red River border and approaching fast to the Khamer... we’d best be on our guard.” Lt. Colonel Wash nodded in response. Colonel Amadeus took in a sharp intake of breath

before launching pre-emptive orders.

“Set the alert standby one notch higher, increase recon perimeter by twenty-five and post officers of the watch further off the boundary. Set the whole brigade on high alert, even combat service support battalions like the Medical, Ordnance, hell, even the Finance Battalion just in case! I want routine rotations of patrols on the towns around the river, specifically the northern ones like Amal or Yeil. Make sure there are no Zenebas soldiers creeping in under our radar and tell our guys and gals to keep an eye out for this ‘Kreep.’ I want him dead before our offensive launches.” the colonel ordered with a firm and controlled cadence. Yet one could still sense the restrained anxiety in his voice, as hard as the man tried to hide it.

“Sir,” Lt. Colonel Wash began, “Might I recommend consulting Gunnery Officer Claudia Giuseppe of the 16th SSBN? This seems to be her field of specialty.”

“The human one?” the colonel asked, struggling to recall her.

“Yes sir, there *is* only one human CO in this brigade.” Wash confirmed, “Her battalion specializes in marksmanship, ‘sniping’ I believe the politically correct term is. The 16th Sisters Sniper Battalion? We might have a higher chance of tagging this Kreep if we have sharpshooters of our own on our side.”

The colonel frowned for a moment, contemplating the lieutenant colonel’s suggestion before speaking, “All right very well, have this Officer... ‘Giuseppe’ present in the war-room at 2300 hours. No scratch that, I want all four ZABN lieutenant colonels to be there, you included. You are dismissed, lieutenant colonel.”

Lt. Colonel Wash snapped into action, saluting the colonel once and clicking his boots together before exiting the tactical operations center to fulfill his duty. The colonel meanwhile, had slumped onto the commanding seat and was thoughtfully analyzing the pictures he had been given. Incredible really, how a single pilot could wipe out nearly ten to twelve fully-armed Zoids. Surely amidst the chaos someone must have caught the Imperial worm. But for every engagement that this so-called 'Kreep' was spotted at, none had made it out alive. *If you racked up all of this Kreep's so-called 'kills' as of now, he'd be a certified ace, Amadeus noted drily, As if I don't already have enough on my plate...*

Colonel Amadeus had already considered the possibility of this 'Kreep' being a tool of propaganda. A fictitious savior of the Zenebas army and a way to motivate them. A war legend. But one of the pictures attached said otherwise. It was a shaky and blurred image, taken from the visual readouts of the black box of a Republican Zoid in its last moments of operations. A shimmer of red. And a black blur that was clearly a modified rifle mounted on its back. *What kind of an idiot would paint his entire Zoid red?* Amadeus wondered, utterly bewildered, Sure, most Imperial Zoids were painted red but the bulk of their frame was a gunmetal grey. Most field Zoids had toned down reds as well, some of them had entirely new paint schemes for different environments, to add. In an urban one, one would expect a Zenebas pilot to stick with the default one, but this Kreep had done the absurd by painting the entire thing bright red. *He might as well paint crosshairs on his cockpit.*

The colonel breathed out a heavy sigh and reached into a desk drawer for a 200ml bottle of ether, pouring the ethyl alcoholic beverage into a small cup. *It doesn't matter how good this Kreep thinks he is, Amadeus assured himself as he readied*

himself to take a swig, *as long as the offensive is successful, I don't think we'll end up like the rest of these sorry bastards. It's an exec order but...maybe...*

He took another squint down at the images. The mutilated bodies of the Zoids torn apart by hard hitting rounds. The split head of a Snakes unit. The Godos that must have been shot off a roof and fallen down; impaling itself on a cemetery gate's spire. Amadeus shuddered and quickly poured the drink back into its proper place before slipping both the bottle and the cup back into the drawer. He shook his head in an attempt to stop living in fantasies as he got off his seat.

"Sir?" the radioman asked as the colonel's imposing shape approached him.

"Um..." Colonel Amadeus droned, dragging the last syllable as he brooded, "Boy, contact Chaplain Titus. Tell him to meet me in my quarters in an hour. Tell him..." the colonel paused again, slightly embarrassed at what he was about to say, "Tell him I want him there for a confessional."

The radioman looked slightly worried at the colonel's request; it was the first time he had asked for the chaplain. As the radioman swirled his chair back to the console to contact Chaplain Titus, Colonel Amadeus walked out of the tactical operations center.

"Moons help us all."

Chapter Two

Excerpt from transcript 'Concerning Central Continent Literature and Culture'

By Assistant Director of the Delpoi Folklore Society (DFS),
Tita Breeze

Conducted 26th April, ZAC 2040 at 9th Annual DFS
Congregation

...It was a tale common amongst the people of the Earth Tribe, that the source of the tectonic instability in the earliest days of the advent calendar was a massive subterranean annelid known only as 'Kreep.' Its name is derived from the Earth Tribe's dialect word for 'the worm who eats.' Though there are many different variations of the story throughout the generations, the oldest primary media record dates back to ZAC 998, written in a manuscript anthologized in several scrolls, found under the catacombs of what is now Helic City. These scrolls speak of Kreep as the sword of the Moons, the angel who served its masters. Legend has it that Kreep was sent by the Moons above to watch the people of Zi and punish them for their wrongs. It was said that the worm sneaks unsuspectingly under the ground, hidden from plain sight and searching for evil men and women before surging out of the earth and devouring the wicked.

Eerily enough, when Helic Muroa managed to bind the warring tribes of Delpoi together when he instigated an 'assault' from the tribes of the Dark Continent, these tectonic disturbances stopped occurring and even more strangely, began occurring again during the Central Continent War. One can't help but wonder if there is some connection, no matter how irrational, there is between these whispering legends and the actual truth. Some of you might clearly be skeptical about this. I am aware that with the introduction of so many new innovations of technology and science by the humans have definitely helped this planet improve as both a race and a developing civilization, but I hope that we do not lose sight of our

cultural roots and heritage in the process...

0014 hours, Sep 8th

War-Room, Bivouac *Hassin*

Gunnery Officer Claudia Giuseppe of the 16th Sisters Sniper Battalion crossed her arms tightly as she gazed at the war-room's clock. 2414 hours, Claudia noted, *an hour or so late*. She sighed. Rumor had it that the colonel had called the chaplain to his room for a 'confessional,' apparently the colonel was stressed out by something – so stressed that he had fallen back on religious deities. Claudia wasn't one for religion, back on her home-planet of Earth, an ultimatum known as '*dictum sabbathia*' had been issued, which banned the practice of any form of organized religion. She hadn't known any higher presence since her birth, rather, she preferred to put her trust in more grounded things like skill and will.

Both had been useful during her time on the battlefield. She was only sixteen when she arrived on Zi and signed up for the Republican Army's then-developing Zoids program. One of the first markswomen of the army, she had passed her cadre's selection process with flying colors and was also one of the few awarded by the Republican High Command a marksmanship award known as the Sniper Master's Badge after her impressive performance in the Battle for the Red River. She still had it on with her and she wore that badge proudly, a third-grade Sniper Master's Badge for seventy-two enemy kills. Of course, she never wore it into actual combat. One couldn't expect the enemy to be particularly lenient to a sniper POW.

"Where the hell is he?" Lt. Colonel Amos Mohinder, the head of the 17th ZABN exclaimed abruptly. Claudia jolted back into

awareness. The 17th ZABN CO's whining had caused several others from fading into sleep as well.

"Give the man time," Lt. Colonel Wash answered with a sigh. He had been saying permutations of that exact sentence for an hour now. Exhaustion from a day's work was taking its toll on everyone, and Wash's tone showed that even he was struggling to keep his resolve.

Claudia glanced around the room. Annabella Imprin of the 8th ZABN had already fallen asleep on the table, her cheek and arms sprawled all over the map of the Central Continent while Mohinder sat on a chair, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. Wash was fiddling with his collar, trying to get an itching spot whilst the final ZABN commanding officer, Dakon Flengéle, was smoking a cigar despite the fact that that was against campus rules.

Flengéle took a puff before voicing his opinion, "I think the old man's gone soft."

"What's wrong with praying to the Moons?" Wash asked, keeping his tone cautiously and pacifistically neutral. Despite the fact that worship of Zi's three natural satellites was the global religion of the planet, some Zoidians were slowly becoming a little more dubious of it with the advent of both technology and the arrival of humans. All of a sudden the Zoidians didn't feel so important now that they knew there were others like them out there.

"Nothing, I guess," Flengéle admitted, "Just seems out of character for the colonel."

Claudia silently agreed but did not say anything. She felt awkward being in the war-room; generally the 16th SSBN was a support battalion and did not engage in the planning

stages of the brigade. Only these select four ZABN superiors and the colonel machinated the plans, support battalions like hers just followed orders. Everything that happened inside the war-room was strictly confidential as well. Rank-wise, she was at least one pay grade below everyone else in the room, hell, she'd probably only been into the war-room two or three times at the most. Claudia was fully aware that the meeting here was to plan how to repel the invading Zenebas forces from the north-west, who were pushing into the Khamer, but why she was here was anyone's guess. But the colonel had specifically requested her presence and her well-trained senses told her that chances are, it probably had something to do with her battalion's 'expertise.'

Wash was being awfully quiet as well. He was more or less the right-hand man of the colonel, a soft-spoken individual with a brilliant tactical mind and someone who was absolutely ruthless in battle. He had remained impertinent about revealing what was troubling the colonel and what the meeting had been called for, though it was fairly evident that he knew. Claudia didn't prod him; Wash didn't crack easily under pressure. But still, the reasons bugged at her, like a nimbostratus cloud hanging over her and she itched to find out why her attendance was required.

Guess I'll find out now, she told herself as she smiled silently at the coincidence as the colonel himself suddenly strode into the room. Near instantly, as though a current of electricity had just surged throughout the room's occupants, everyone immediately strapped up to attention. Even the slumbering Imprin, who was shaken awake by Mohinder, rubbed her groggy eyes and saluted the colonel. Flengéle crushed his cigar skillfully under the table before slipping it into his rear pocket. Claudia herself, despite her sleep-deprived brain and body, forced herself to stand straight and salute her

commanding officer. The colonel put a stop to it all with a wave of his hands as he strode over to the discussion table, a thick binder in his hand. Claudia grimaced as she caught his expression.

Colonel Amadeus' face was grim, the expression one would expect from a man on death row. His black hair was messy as was his stubble, with the occasional white strand and his plump physique seemed to sag with him as he walked, his coarse and oily skin reflecting off in the dim light. *What could be so foreboding?* The gunnery sergeant speculated the possibilities as she reached for a chair at the table, but none seem to come to mind. As the other lieutenant colonels took their own seats, the Colonel sat himself down and opened the binder with a heavy sigh. Inside were several papers and a stack of photos which he then slipped to the center of the table. He propped back on his chair as everyone else except Wash scrambled to get a look of the photos.

A curtain of silence swept across the entire congregation. Looks of disbelief and horror smeared themselves on everyone's face. Even Flengéle for once had nothing to say. Claudia herself nearly felt her jaw slip down comically. Her eyes widened as she looked at two of the satellite-taken images. Towns filled with the dead carcasses of Republican Zoids. All of a sudden she finally understood what the idiom 'butterflies in the stomach' meant.

"Moons Almighty." Imprin finally whispered after a long and awkward moment of dead air, "Those poor bastards."

"...What...happened, sir?" Mohinder asked, stuttering somewhat.

"An executive order came just several hours ago to eliminate the Zenebas asset that caused this destruction. Interception

of Zenebas communiqués by our own cryptographers tells us that this asset's callsign is 'Kreep,' aside from that we do not know much." The colonel scampered through the pile of images and selected the one showcasing the red blur, "Here's all we have of this Kreep. We don't know anything aside from the fact that it's being accompanied by stationary Zoid decoys, all of which are painted red. How it looks like. Nothing. Only thing going through its victims' corpses tell us is that it uses a 70mm bullet."

"Leading intelligence to believe that this 'Kreep' is a *sniper* unit. Tactics and its modus operandi seem to fit the profile, which is why I've requested your presence, Officer," the colonel explained as he glanced at Claudia, "Because this brigade has sniper units and is the closest to the Khamer, we have been mobilized on a man hunt for this Kreep. We are already aware that Zenebas forces have forced us to retreat from the Red and into the Khamer. They're closing in on us. We can expect this Kreep to arrive as well. That serves as a problem towards our fallback plan, which was to initiate an aggressive hold-the-front assault in the event that the Red forces pulled back. Until we find this Zenebas sniper...I'm afraid the assault's been put on hold."

A fleet of murmurs began to circle around the room and even Claudia found herself somewhat taken aback. Now the colonel's sudden epiphany didn't appear so much as an overreaction. Now she understood the gravity of the predicament, a whole brigade being mobilized for an enemy with no face. It only made her realize how dire circumstances were.

"The whole fuc-" Mohinder began before being cut off.

"The whole battalion, Lt. Colonel. Over the course of three days only, as well." Colonel Amadeus affirmed. Mohinder

placed a fist to his lips as he let out a sharp breath.

“Kreep? As in the worm?” Imprin asked. Claudia wanted to ask what in hell a worm had to do with the callsign, but politely held her own thoughts back.

“Yes, the worm. Kreep.” The colonel answered with a gesture, “Beginning with a K. The Earth Tribe legend, not the English verb.”

Flengéle coughed politely as he posed his queries, “Sir, how do we know for sure that there is only one single unit, if there are no survivors or witnesses to tell the tale? And how do we know this unit is a...” he said the next word with a near condescending tone, “...sniper?”

Claudia raised one eyebrow suggestively at the 19th ZABN commanding officer’s intonation but the colonel was direct to the point in his response, “Yes, Flengéle, we know for sure that there is only one single unit. According to this report, a complete correlation by the forensics department of all the dead Zoids’ black boxes has been made which *do* show the presence of several other Zenebas Zoids, generally irrelevant ones like Gators or Iguans. They were painted red as well. Funny thing was, we never found any bodies in the Republican Zoids we recovered. ‘Cept dead ones.”

“He’s using them as cannon fodder...using those Gators... Iguans as decoys...” Claudia suddenly muttered, her sniper training instinctually coming to a disclosure. *Using so many decoys just for a single unit?*

“That is the prevailing opinion,” the colonel said in agreement, “But none of the Zoids showed deaths from these units. Most simply went offline in a second and in the clips of those that did, the sound of a crack can be heard. The sonic

boom of a high-precision rifle. The 70mm round found in these units matches it as well; each one from all the towns in the Red River this ‘Kreep’ was sighted.”

“It does make logical sense, sir,” Claudia acknowledged, “A sniper’s primary goal is to support a larger combat unit, but you can do the flipside and have the combat unit serve as distractions for a sniper to take down priority targets undisturbed. Kreep might also have used them to keep the enemy busy while he-or she, stalked for vantage points or noted enemy strength. The small group was protected by Kreep and the number also made defending them more manageable.”

“Your second question is answered then, Flengéle.” The colonel finished off.

“Surely someone must have heard this...sonic boom then, sir?” Mohinder inquired.

“The sound of gunfire can significantly mask the sound of sniper fire.” Claudia answered for the colonel, suddenly feeling as though she was taking the spotlight, “Even if they did hear it and tried to locate the starting point of the sound, this ‘Kreep’ might have relocated. Snipers often relocate after a few shots to confuse the enemy and for the human...or Zoidian ear to accurately pinpoint where a shot’s origin is... the person in question needs to be at least five-hundred to five-hundred and twenty meters from the origin point.”

Flengéle made a rude noise but Claudia ignored him, “What were the time parameters of these shots, sir? Do you know?”

Wash held up a sheet of paper to the light to read the fine print as he noted, “A mean average of nine seconds in each interval, with the pattern of a deviation included; a thirty-

second interval more or less.”

“The time between shots, and the time between his relocation, right?” Imprin asked Claudia, who nodded.

“Kreep’s being patient. Taking time between shots to make sure they hit true. One shot; one kill. The sniper’s adage.”

“It’s red.” Mohinder obtusely commented as he scanned the blurred image, “I thought snipers were meant to camouflage? I don’t think red blends well with the urban environment.”

“For all we know, it might not be a Zoid. That might not be him, even,” Wash reasoned, “It could be something else maybe, a burning Zenebas flag?”

“Possible.” Mohinder quipped, too tired to debate.

“Gunnery Officer,” the colonel suddenly interrupted, “I know it’s abrupt, but do you already have a general outline for a proposal in mind?”

Claudia coughed uncomfortably as all eyes were turned on her. The cogs and gears in her head were already spinning into action – suddenly her presence here was understood by Claudia. Taking a subtle breath, she began, “Under the assumption that this Kreep is a sniper, the best course of action during combat would be to pull a bluff, sir.” Claudia offered.

“Bluff?” Wash said aloud.

“Elaborate,” the colonel ordered.

“We need to lure him out, sir,” Claudia explained, “Zenebas cantonments have already been set up in the towns a little northern, like Amal or Yeil. If we assume that Kreep is

advancing towards one of them, more likely to be Yeil, we could create our own distraction by using our assault towards Zenebas forces there. We don’t alter the plan, sir, simply integrate it. Rather than hunting Kreep down prior to this assault, we launch the offensive and then kill Kreep in the process. It’ll significantly lower casualties caused by this ‘Kreep,’ and also keep rumors of Zenebas marksman down. Amidst the crossfire, it would be hard for a sniper, even a seasoned one, to locate targets. Our own counter-sniper fire will be masked by it as well.”

“We have an ace up our sleeves too, Kreep is not aware that we have snipers of our own on our side. Our snipers could now act as counter-snipers and instead use the general forces to act as distractions so that it could give the chance for my SSBN women to take down this Kreep. It’s an assault; paired with a hunt. Two birds; one stone.”

“Two birds...one stone?” Flengéle said with a sneer, obviously unfamiliar with the largely human idiom.

The colonel toyed with his stubble as he mused, “A competent strategy you have there, officer. You seem fairly confident in your tactic, though it still doesn’t ease me. We are facing a bogey right now; we have no knowledge of what it is, its capabilities, and its weaknesses. We have nothing on our sides. Make no mistake, soldiers; I fear there will be casualties in this.”

Colonel Amadeus stretched out his arms to smoothen the Delpoi map on the table as he reached for a case of geometrical tools, compasses, rulers and such while the other lieutenant colonels and Claudia herself eased closer to the table surface.

The colonel cracked his knuckles as he brought his resolve

back together. *Apparently the chaplain did provide some comfort*, Claudia remarked to herself. She could tell Colonel Amadeus was trying to shape himself up to be the competent leader he was supposed to be. She felt a slight tinge of newfound respect for her CO.

“It’s nearly going to be dawn now, and we don’t have much time to form a battle plan.” Colonel Amadeus said as reached for a marker, “Let’s begin.”

1438 hours, Sep 9th

Khamer-River town Yeil, Delpoi

Sergeant Ibrik Scylla pushed the bullet-ridden door aside as she exited the washroom. Zipping her pants back up in one swift motion, she made her way over to the whirring Guysack where her partner Joanna Don was waiting. The Guysack had had extensive repairs by the engineering battalion, supervised by Ibrik herself after their encounter with the Hammer Rock. It was in full operational status, aside from its right pincer, which was deemed unfit for service and had to be ‘amputated’ off the Zoid without administered painkillers.

The Zoid had not moved from its sniping position at all, in fact it had barely even shifted a step for the last three hours from its post on the second floor of what was once a Yeilian hotel. The bombed-out skeleton of the building provided the perfect sniping spot for them, despite the five-meter ceiling restriction, which meant that the Guysack’s tail had to be pressed down on its back for the Zoid to fit, another reason why generally smaller Zoids were chosen for the role of a sniper. Still, it was an ideal location for their mission objective, which was hunting down the Zenebas asset known

as ‘Kreep.’ Only thing Gunnery Officer Giuseppe had told them was to look out for anything ‘red.’

Tension and unease had filled the entire brigade as the mass mobilization coded as ‘Operation Season’ began. The entirety of the 6th ZABN had scrambled into action early yesterday morning, when it was just the break of dawn and had swarmed into the Khamer-River towns, crossing the DMZs that had separated the Republic from the Zenebas forces. Whilst the other units were mounting their assaults, the snipers of the 16th Sisters Sniper Battalion had been split into individual towns, moving into position, keeping their Zoids concealed in the most creative of hiding spots to snipe the enemy. The order was clear and simple: *Find Kreep, kill Kreep. One shot; one kill.*

One shot; one kill, the sniper’s motto rang through Ibrik’s mind as she mounted herself back up into her cockpit on the scorpion-type Zoid’s tail. Despite that she, like most Zoids pilots, had been taught to be able to minimize water consumption and refrain from urinating during operational times, Ibrik couldn’t resist emptying her tight bladder when she had spotted the hotel’s bathroom. Joanna, on the other hand, wasn’t willing to take the chance.

“It took you five minutes to piss and climb back up there.” Joanna buzzed just as Ibrik slipped into her cockpit and placed her comm link headphones on.

“You actually counted?” Ibrik asked with a laugh as she clipped her safety harness on.

“Just imagine, in that five minutes, someone spots Kreep. And we miss the shot, we can’t take it. Why?” Joanna said, stressing every syllable with an exaggerated tone, “Because Sergeant Scylla needed a potty break.”

"I wasn't shitting," Ibrik said in her defense, somewhat lamely. Joanna did have a point, but Ibrik found she was somewhat unwound. They were given strict orders not to engage enemies, as it ran the risk of revealing their spots. The agitation had somewhat dissipated after one day and several additional hours in the same posture.

"We can't take risks like that, Ibrik," Joanna said, frustrated at her friend's trivialness on the matter, "From what Officer Giuseppe said, this Kreep is dangerous; you can't just let your guard slip because you're bored! You have to stay frosty."

"I know, damn it--"

"Wait, shh, hold on," Joanna discontinued her friend, "Turn on the open channel on your wireless."

Ibrik decided to let the argument and dropped and switched the Republican channel on, sending a flood of messages into her pinging device. The machine slowly registered the coded messages and a flock of reports burst onto her small monitor screen just below her joystick controls. Ibrik felt her throat dry up as she scanned through them. Suddenly her sniper grounding kicked into full alert status.

"Kreep is advancing." Ibrik said, paraphrasing straight from the reports, "Wouldn't Kreep fall back? In between all these firefights?"

"Maybe Kreep's just insane in the brain," said Joanna with a monotone, "Moment we get reports about Kreep sightings, people suddenly drop. He's revising his sniper strategy."

"He's lost it, look at this one, he's even branching off from his own decoys apparently. He's acting like an assault unit now."

"True. But then again maybe he can afford it. Like if he's a

superweapon-type thing." Joanna replied in agreement before arbitrarily commenting, "Funny how we refer to Kreep as a male, don't you think?"

"*He* is the generally accepted singular personal pronoun for the English language," Ibrik answered after a momentary pause, "You hear humans saying *he* this, and *he* that. Only time it's a *she* is when they're talking about Zoids."

"Or ships."

"Or ships. Or planes. Sometim--"

"Don! Scylla!" a voice suddenly interrupted through the channel. Ibrik recognized it as belonging to Private Hensel Permagunde, the sniper of the *other* Guysack unit in the vicinity and a relatively new addition to the ranks of the 16th SSBN, "Stock exchange building, across the road, third-floor window, second from the right! Look!" The private's high-pitched voice was nearly bursting with excitement.

"What is it?" Ibrik said out loud as she pulled down the field glasses from above her and slowly maneuvered it to locate the window that Permagunde was indicating. It took a moment for Ibrik to find where Permagunde was indicating to, these river towns often had confusing Water Tribe-style architecture, curved and parabolic arches like the ocean, what some humans had referred to as 'post-modernist-esque' design, whatever the hell that meant. When she located the correct window though, she found the source of the private's discomposure. A red gleam.

"Is that him? Is that Kreep?" Ibrik asked, barely able to contain her trepidation.

"Maybe it's an optical illusion? Like a trick of the light

thing?" Joanna asked out loud. Ibrik had considered that. It didn't seem right that a skilled marksman would conceal himself behind a piece of glass. A *translucent* piece of glass, no less. Then again, Joanna did say he's probably insane. Painting a sniper Zoid *red* was already insane.

"This is it, ladies," Sergeant Tec Kempfer, Permagunde's spotter said exultantly, "This is the perfect situation – where we can see him but he can't see us."

"I don't know..." Joanna said apprehensively, "Shouldn't he already be aware that there are snipers, I mean reports say he did drop some SSBN members as well. How does it look like from your vantage point?"

"Can't see clearly, even with the maximum x7 magnification," Kempfer answered from her position high on the roof of an apartment complex, behind a water tank and under a piece of camouflage canvas, "Looks like a red...*smear* from up here."

"If it ain't him...he'll know we're here if we shoot. Might expose us. Could be a decoy for all we know," Joanna continued.

"And then the hunter becomes the hunted," Kempfer said cynically, "That is a risk I'm willing to take. If we can nail him now... right now, we're dominating. Right now, we're the hunters stalking our game."

"Have you made the call?" Joanna questioned Permagunde.

"Not yet, I'm on it," Permagunde said hurriedly. Ibrik could hear her over the intercom, "Command post, command post. This is SB-17, over. We have a visual on Zenebas asset 'Kreep,' break. Heavily limited view of target background, break. Awaiting further instruction."

Ibrik bit her lip nervously as she heard Permagunde say a few 'yessirs' and 'yes, ma'ams' before breaking contact. She hastily dived in, "Well, what do we do?"

Ibrik would've bet her whole month's pay cheque that Permagunde was grinning from ear to ear as she gave Joanna the reply, "Command wants us to take the shot – if we can. A coordinated one, too. Might not have another chance, and we don't have any other forces to support us. All heavily engaged. Might scare Kreep away too if he sees units closing in."

"Why coordinated?" Ibrik asked before adding sarcastically, "Command worried that one 70-mm round won't leave a big enough hole?"

"Can't risk it, we still don't know what Kreep can do," Permagunde explained, "Plus, it'll confuse him, right?"

"Not at this range, I don't think," Kempfer stated, "But don't quote me on that."

"Sisters...are you sure this is the best thing to do?" Joanna asked, "I mean, command's rushing into it...makes me feel like an expendable."

"Command's probably afraid we won't get another shot, and at any rate, why would the Empire leave a decoy in clear sight without risking the death of their own soldier? It's probably Kreep just going a little mental," Kempfer reasoned, "Now come on, let's lock and load."

"I still don't like it..." was Joanna's only response.

"Hoo boy..." Ibrik said with a whistle as she cracked her neck, feeling the foamy neck brace turn around as she prepared herself both mentally and physically. Radio silence

came on impromptu, aside from the most critical of relays. Ibrik could hear Joanna sliding clicks and pressing buttons over the intercom. Ibrik herself started the routine by turning off the safety switch and loading a new round into the chamber. The screen flashed 'CLEAR.'

"Loaded. Call for fire please," Ibrik said as she pulled down the field glasses once more and kept her sights on the window. Looking at the bearing on top of her glasses, she shifted the Guysack's tail accordingly before pressing down on the intercom once more, "Range it."

"Hold on..." Joanna said, trailing off as she gauged the distance, "80 yards. Stationary."

Ibrik keyed it in and the on-board computer hummed as it concocted a firing solution. Ibrik noted the windage on the stadia marks both left, and right. Carefully, she toyed with the gyroscopes, bringing her reticule onto the target, directing the crosshairs so it was placed squarely at where she predicted Kreep would be. At this distance, she didn't even have to worry about the chevrons for bullet drop.

"Hold scope..." Joanna ordered as she patched herself into Permagunde and Kempfer's channel, "Have you guys got a solution?"

"Roger that," Kempfer answered.

"Fire when ready," Joanna told Ibrik this time.

"On my mark, Permagunde," Ibrik whispered, somehow fearful that Kreep might hear them, "Three. Two."

"Mark."

The two Guysacks fired their sniper rifles in coordination,

the sonic booms setting off as their hard-hitting rounds left the barrels with a bang. Ibrik's cockpit jerked back as the rifle fired but she quickly recovered before rushing to put the field glasses on the scan setting. It did not even take a second before the bullets made contact and the window glass split into a firework of shards.

"Hit." Joanna said with a concealed chortle of victory.

Permagunde let out a yell to follow-up Joanna's blazon, "Hell yeah! We got him, Sisters, we got that Imperial? Right? We got him now!"

Ibrik let out a sigh, an exasperated one. She found herself smiling, for the first time in two days. It was as though a strenuous weight had been lifted off her. She'd taken the shot – and she'd won.

"Nice job, Sister," Joanna congratulated over the line, "This one's definitely one to catalog."

"Mission accomplished," Ibrik responded as she closed in on her field glasses to survey the shot.

"I'm calling command right now," Permagunde was practically screaming in ecstasy at this point, "They'll be—"

CRACK! Another bullet flew through the air as Ibrik's expression changed. One second she found that the 'red target' they had hit was just a Gator painted red, a decoy, and the next she heard the wireless line with Permagunde and Kempfer go dead. In the tenth of a second that their shots differentiated when they left the barrel, the enemy was able to make out their position. As far as Ibrik knew, only snipers did that – and she had a pretty good guess who as well.

"Damn this, it's him!" Joanna yelled over the line, "Kempfer?"

Permagunde? You th-ah, crud, he got them!”

“He got them,” Ibrik repeated, still somewhat stunned. She quickly panned the Guysack’s tail to try to locate the source of the bullet before Joanna cried,

“Ibrik! Stop moving the tail, he’ll see-” Just at that moment a second round rang through and narrowly missed Ibrik’s cockpit, smashing instead on the cement wall of the hotel with deadly accuracy. Ibrik could see loose plaster scatter from the ceiling above as the bullet sent vibrations through the entire building. She winced at her close brush with death. Joanna, on the other hand, had all senses acute and smartly lowered the Guysack’s entire frame until its legs gave way and its belly was flat on the ground, effectively removing whatever visuals Kreep had on them.

“Kempfer? Kempfer?!” Ibrik heard Joanna over the connection, “Private? Are you there? If you’re still alive, please respond!”

Sweat dripped down Ibrik’s forehead as she tightened and loosened her hands into fists, over and over again, an idiosyncrasy of hers that manifested whenever she felt under pressure. She hadn’t felt this much pressure since marksmanship school, where the instructors had students jump off ledges to be caught by their partners – just to build trust amongst snipers and spotters. Now, the enemy had the advantage as it knew where they were, and roles had changed. Now, they were the game....and Kreep had become the hunter. Fear gripped Ibrik’s very being.

“They’re not responding,” Joanna said, her tone one of frustration, “But their beacon’s still active...Ibrik, switch positions, I’m heading towards them, see if they’re still alive. They might have made it out, at least one of them. Bring the

Guysack round the back of the building they’re on, I’ll be waiting there.”

Ibrik didn’t argue, happy to allow Joanna to take the initiative while she still struggled to grasp hold of their predicament. She pulled the canopy’s lever and the entire hatch burst open with a hiss. Beneath her, Joanna did the same with her cockpit and jumped off, giving Ibrik a quick wave of the hand before dashing off towards the hotel’s stairs. Ibrik grunted as she removed her harness and unclipped the lowering cable, keeping one foot on the cable’s stirrups and one hand on the cable itself as she brought herself a full four-meters down in three seconds. Dismounting from the cable and flicking it once so it reeled itself back up, the sergeant made her way to the main cockpit of the Guysack, jumping once to grip the hand-holds for Zoid desants to heave herself up into the Zoid.

Landing on the cushioned seat, Ibrik glanced sideways at the running figure of Joanna, who could now be seen on the road, dashing somewhat madly towards Permagunde and Kempfer before vanishing into the apartment. Ibrik re-focused her attention back at the instrument panel in front of her, a mass of dials, meters, and buttons that formed the Guysack’s main cockpit; a cockpit far more complicated than the sniper one but still one she was far too familiar with. Breathing in one quick, sharp breath of air, she spread her grip over the twin joysticks that commandeered the Guysack’s direction and held them tightly. *Pull yourself together, Ibrik. This was exactly what they warned you about at marksmanship school, Ibrik scolded herself, and it’s all in your head. Kreep is only Zoidian – nothing but a bully. And when bullies shoot you, you shoot the hell back.*

With a newfound constancy, Ibrik snapped into action and

flicked the LWS switch to green status before reaching for another switch to select the available smoke dispenser on the Guysack's right side. As she yanked the joysticks towards her to lift the Guysack off its prone position, Ibrik simultaneously reached for the cockpit's ceiling and pressed the *START* button for the smoke dispensers, prompting the right ballast tank to detach and gas out a thick ebony fume around the Guysack. Ibrik smiled grimly, *suck on that, Kreep*.

The smoke scattered itself all around Ibrik's Zoid, keeping her visually shielded from Kreep. Fully aware that the smokescreen was only temporary, Ibrik nimbly jettisoned her Guysack out of the hotel from the second floor and down on the road below, dragging whiffs of black smoke along with her just as she landed on the asphalt with a clatter. A cloud of dust gathered around the Guysack's elongated legs as it crash-landed and Ibrik felt the entire cockpit jerk with the motions. From her current position, she knew that she was out in the open and on her left was where Kreep was most likely to be. With a flowing gesture, she swiped the toggle switch for the left smoke dispenser and activated it, dispersing the black fumes on the road and around her Zoid once more. Now that she was fully assured that the enemy could not see her – and would not risk a long shot and reveal his position, she backtracked her Guysack away from the cloud, distancing herself from Kreep.

Assuming the elevator's still in service, Ibrik silently thought, *Joanna should be up on the roof by now*. She pivoted her view upwards and tried to glance at the apartment's roof but at her angle, she couldn't make out if there was anyone there or not. Ibrik did, however, note that the round had pierced the water tank to get to Permagunde and Kempfer, who were most likely taking cover behind a thin surface, a regretful mistake. Water was still dripping off the building's roof and several

droplets had made their way onto her dust canopy, obscuring her view as she switched the visual cameras to spotter mode to magnify the distance. A sinking emotion of desolation found its way to Ibrik's heart as she saw a formation of Storches strafing in for the kill. Something that had once been an aid to concealing her shots was about to become her demise.

"Moons Almighty," Ibrik swore. The day just seemed to be one cataclysm after the other. She turned on the radio console and immediately switched to the encoded Republican network. Sure enough, her suspicions were confirmed. The Republican offensive had proved particularly damaging, leading the Zenebas to resort to desperate measures, the bomber squadrons of Storches. A retreat order had already been issued but it must have come through during Ibrik's and Joanna's position switch, which would explain why they never received it. Ibrik swore once more. Perhaps Joanna was right about staying frosty after all. On the other hand though, at least this would get this 'Kreep' off their backs, if only temporarily.

Fall back. That was the first thought in Ibrik's mind as she accessed the on-screen map of Yeil and calculated the distance from her current location to the edge of the town leading to the river. *About five-hundred meters, I might make it*. The smoke was already beginning to clear out as the wind picked up and the orange silhouettes of the Storches were closing in as well. Ibrik quickly shift the Guysack into reverse gear, falling back behind a small path, a shamble of stalls that had once been a market-place. *Come on, come on, you infernal contraption, get those legs pumping!* The Guysack's feet thrashed the stalls to shreds and its dull grey paint slowly chipped off as Ibrik toiled to steer the Guysack into a back alley that would safely lead her to the back of the apartment.

“Joanna, where in the name of the Moons are you?” Ibrik muttered as she brought the Guysack to a stop, “Come on... get down here now!” A cacophony of explosions could be heard from the distance and Ibrik knew that the Storches had already begun their attack. It would only be a matter of time before they arrived at her current position. Ibrik unclipped her helmet and safety harness before opening the cockpit and dismounting from it, her heavy combat boots landing on the rocky road with a *thud*. Double-checking that her pilot’s sidearm was fully loaded before slipping it into her thigh holster, the sergeant exited out of the alleyway and into the main junction, determined to recover her missing Sister. Far off she could see the Storches slowly approaching, and a mass of smoke and flames that erupted from where their bombs had hit. *Only a matter of time*, Ibrik warned herself as she slipped into the apartment.

The building had suffered badly from the after-effects of war, and Ibrik cringed her nose when she smelled the scents of death and corrosion. Walls had been stripped apart and burn marks were everywhere. The stench of dead bodies crept from every corner and the crevices of the lobby were crawling with insects. Ignoring all of it, Ibrik ran towards the elevator of the floor and pressed the button for a response. None came. *Shit*. Still, the thumping bombs that were itching closer became even louder and louder. *Shit. Shit. Shit*. Ibrik knew she had to make a decision – and before it was too late. There wouldn’t be any more time; Ibrik silently worded a prayer to the Moons for Joanna before guiltily dashing straight out of the apartment and onto the main road once more.

She was already too late. Above her the formation of Storches were beginning to release their pylons and drop their bombs onto the streets of Yeil. A bomb landed about thirty meters away from Ibrik, displacing her into the air with a wild toss

as she landed on the earth like a ragdoll. The sound ruptured Ibrik’s eardrums as she smashed onto the pavement and blood poured from between her broken teeth. The tenor of detonations were ringing in her ears, and as she struggled to stumble to her feet, she could make out more and more bombs being dropped through her blurred vision, tearing up the town and sending splinters of wood and mud into the air. Ibrik coughed out the soot and tried to regain her focus but all sense of navigation was now lost with the shock. All she could do was wobble away before another explosive landed on the street behind her and flailed her body into the air with a violent and blaring force.

Ibrik was tossed above the pavement for a moment before colliding into the glass window of a nearby department store, wrecking the glass with a loud shatter and landing inside the store in an agonizing crack, glass raining from the explosion like snowflakes on a winter’s day. Ibrik’s vision slowly descended into blackness and the last thing she could make out was the shadow of a tall figure making his way towards her, his hand tightly gripping a pistol.

For the rest of the story, go to http://www.fanfiction.net/s/6236702/1/War_Games

Sakiko.art

Return to Another Tomorrow



Rhian

Concord of Sun & Shadow



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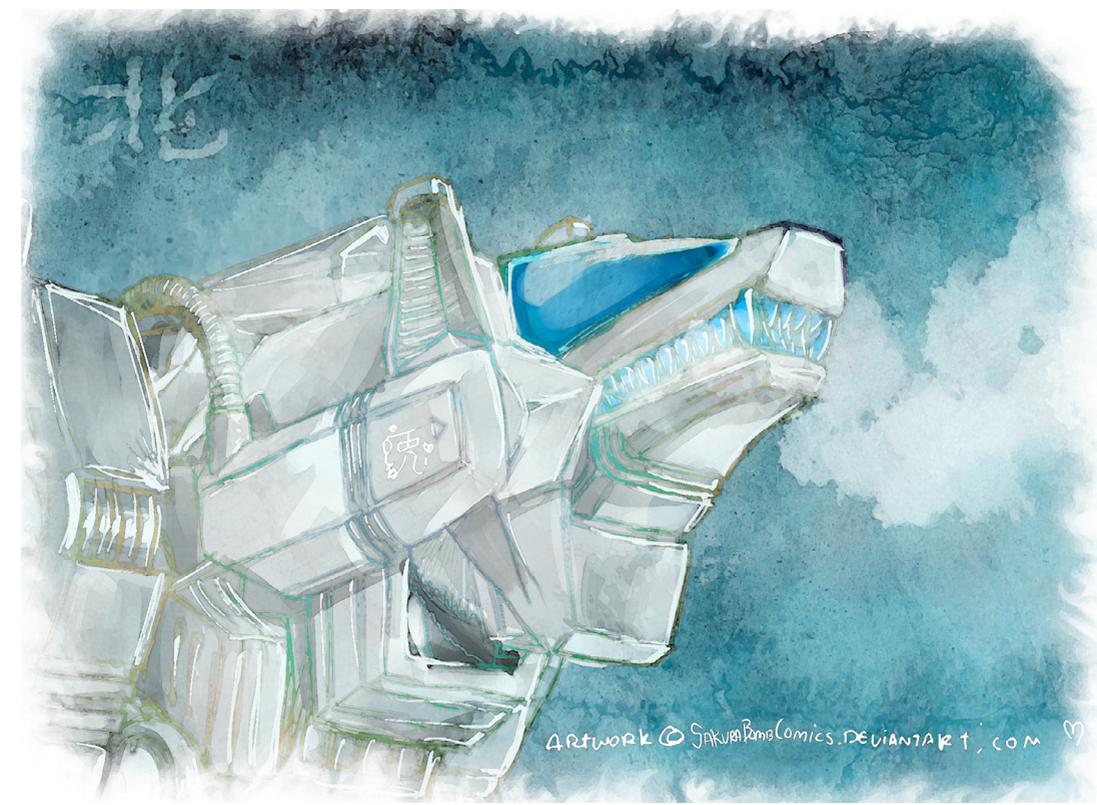
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Sammich



Sara Bouchard (Wolfie Pie)



Pyramus Liger

This is a customized Liger Zero that is based off of Pyramid Head from the Silent Hill series.

The helmet, which is made of cardboard and plastic, is removable. It's equipped with twin Gatling guns that are set between its boosters.



Battle Chimera

This is a customized Battle Cougar that's made to look more canine-like through heavy facial modifications.

It also has enhanced weaponry and proper claws on its back feet.



Zoids Beginnings: Raika's Story - Volume 1

First

She was not lost.

She knew exactly where she was, geographically speaking. Her makeshift campfire constituted a dot on the dark outline of the Olympian mountain range. Once the sun set a little more, a sharp-eyed citizen of Grolm might be able to spot it. If she wanted to, bringing up her exact longitudinal coordinates was not out of the question...not for herself or for the people tracking her down.

The fire sputtered, still deciding if it wanted to go out immediately or smolder for a while in the embers. Before it could make up its mind, she fed it a few sticks and nursed it back to health. Yes, it was giving away her location, but considering the circumstances, that detail wasn't nearly as important as the oasis of warmth it created.

She was a Saber, a Hilvaran military elite of the highest rank, but it was not on military business that she tended a fire on a foreign mountainside. The king had lost his mind; or rather, he had tried to lose hers. By some method beyond common understanding he was bending his subordinates unquestioningly to his requests. He had miscalculated her strength of will and sent her into the field for a little too long, allowing her to realize his treachery. In that long-sought moment of clarity she had run as far as she could.

He was not going to let her go easily. Already she had heard tale of the towns along her escape route being ransacked by the hapless soldiers of the Hilvaran army. The Grolm military forces were ill matched to contend with an attack of this scale, and she was sure it would only get worse until she went

back. The question was: would it get better even then? While she could not fully remember the details of her assignment, her location suggested some ill-tempered plan against their neighboring country. Would she be helping them by turning herself in only to be subverted into personally seeing to their destruction later?

That was a question best answered during the warmer, sunlit hours. Right now she would have to be content tending her fire and wondering about the more material concerns of food and eventual shelter.

A slight smile cracked her lips; the result of a memory as sour as it was sweet. This wasn't the first time her fate had combined fire and a sudden need for shelter. The fledgling smile disappeared as the inevitable truth made itself heard: there would be no rescue like the last one.

"So tell me, oh honored Duke: how do you manage to stomach all the dishonorable trickery you end up in?" The voice was booming, emanating from a man who seemed deserving of it. He was robust, his chest swelled with the commanding presence of a knight and his stout arms matched perfectly, outdone only by his sturdy legs and the plethora of decorations and awards he wore on his perfectly creased, brown and gold uniform. His dark blond hair was cut short, but looked as if it had once been shorter and was being allowed a new freedom. The distinct mustache trimmed carefully on his square face was less fortunate. Contrasting the sharp corners of his chin were his round glasses, old but seemingly as reliable as him. He was not tall, perhaps slightly under the average, and probably no older than his thirties, but that fact did little to reduce his formidable demeanor.

The man walking at his side seemed conspicuously out of place next to him. The uniform placed on his thin frame

was comprised of shades of black and gray and sported no medallions or patches. His hands seemed sewn into his pockets and at the same time he gave off the air of always being far more comfortable than anyone around him. The thin smile pervading his lips was just as perennial, complementing a face that, by all appearances, was stuck in a permanent smirk. As he considered a response, his coal black eyebrows raised instinctively.

“Stomach? There’s your problem, Wagner, you can’t ‘stomach’ things. That’s the same as ‘bottling them up’.” He smiled a little wider, laughing silently. “You don’t have to ‘be ok’ with orders, just follow them. It’s best not to think too much about it”

“And your problem is that you lack all semblance of a moral compass!” Wagner retorted, his voice rising slightly as if exclaiming something of remarkable importance.

“A moral compass?” Duke was laughing audibly now. “There’s no such thing. A compass is true in that it never wavers. Even if certain death waits northward a compass will not lead in any other direction. Any mortal can claim his ideals are worth more to him than his life, but when tested... they back down almost every time.” His expression changed to one of amusement as something ahead caught his eye. “But if you insist, old friend...” he started in a faux serious tone, “...what does your moral compass say about that?”

He pointed to a small, soot-bathed figure sitting on the curb just ahead of them. A glance to his right revealed the still smoking, mud-brick shell of what had been the area’s only orphanage. The fire seemed to have died down, but it was clear that anyone not already outside was not coming out alive. This child was sitting alone and appeared to be unharmed. A stone’s throw away a handful of other children were crying and being attended to by the emergency responders. The only others in sight had clearly been attracted by the spectacle. Some of them were talking

with the water crew which had quenched the fire, and arrangements were being made for the care of the children.

Wagner paused a moment to take all of this in, then fixated on the child now at their feet. Without responding to Duke he crouched next to them, placing a heavy hand on their shoulder. “What’s your name, son?” He said in the gentlest manner he could with his thundering voice.

The child tossed *her* head back to look up at the man grasping her shoulder. His grip wasn’t tight, but it had an uncomfortable firmness to it. Moments before, she had fled as her home had been turned into a mud-walled oven. Had she not been well into sneaking out already, she may well have still been inside.

His voice had been nearly overpowering, but not at all intimidating; a stark difference from her normal experiences. Curious, she jerked backwards out of his grip and laid herself flat on the ground, reaching up to him.

Wagner shifted uncomfortably. The girl lay there on her back, clapping her hands together and staring expectantly up at him. His choices were clear: he could take the child in or he could admit hypocrisy to Duke. A glance at the sneering man looming over him quickly steeled his mind. “Well then...” he said resolutely as he scooped the child up onto his shoulder. No sooner than she reached it, she began trying to fit his forehead into her mouth. “I’ll see to it that you’re cared for.”

For a fleeting moment Duke’s face betrayed his surprise, then he broke into a grin. The child had busied herself grasping handfuls of Wagner’s hair and trying to yank it out. At the same time, she giggled and shrieked incoherently, perhaps trying to decide whether or not she was being kidnapped. Her thin, black eyes were open wide as she struggled first to free herself from his grip, then to slide back in for the safety his hand granted from a painful plummet; all the while using the man’s hair as a handhold. In doing so, she sent showers

of soot over Wagner and revealed that her hair, which Duke had thought was hopelessly infused with the stuff, was actually black itself. It looked untidy and uneven, ending in so many spiked clumps barely above her shoulders.

“You know...” Duke stated slowly, “You can’t just snatch little girls up off the street like that. It’s illegal, and probably immoral too.”

Wagner shot him a look as stern as it was disapproving. “Only someone of your moral fiber would even think about such things,” he rumbled. “You can go on ahead if you like; I’ll need to speak to the authorities to make it official.” With that, he headed towards the group of people crowded around the other children.

Duke chuckled to himself. He’d really gone and done it this time; maybe he pushed the poor fellow a little too far. With a sigh he kept walking. He might as well warn everyone at Salirsth that Wagner had finally lost his mind.

Second

Raika’s eyes shot open, a move she regretted as the late-morning sun nearly blinded her. Her alarm was lying in pieces on the floor, again, a sure sign she had punched it instead of just hitting ‘snooze’.

She blinked a few times as the blurry ceiling settled into its proper shape. Crudely taped directly above her head was a drawing she had made of a Red Horn; a giant, mechanized Styracosaurus outfitted with guns bigger than she was and a cockpit in its head. Ever since Wagner first gave her a tour of the Salirsth military base, four years ago, she had fallen in love with it. The hangar housed many other mechanical beasts, though none interested her nearly as much. There was some long, technical name for them that she never could

quite remember, but the common term ‘zoid’ worked just as well.

Once the fog lifted from her mind, she violently freed herself from her sheets and jumped out of bed. Her alarm was broken and that meant she had slept in. If she had slept in, that meant Wagner had gotten up before her. If Wagner was already up, that meant he had already made breakfast.

She groaned. Wagner was as unreliable in the kitchen as he was dependable everywhere else. She pulled on some worn pants and her favorite shirt, the one with the Red Horn silhouetted against the sunset, and then marched reluctantly into the kitchen to meet whatever wonderful meal he had ruined today.

The barracks they lived in were high-end, but that didn’t amount to much in a country as militaristic as Hilvara. The living area consisted of two compact bedrooms and a bathroom, all attached to a kitchen tight enough to be dominated by a small, round table set into the floor. They were lucky to have windows in both bedrooms, though that didn’t save the kitchen from being bathed in stale, artificial light. It was almost depressing walking from the cool blues of her room into the stark yellows of the kitchen, and all the more unbearable knowing what awaited her there.

She had never had the heart to tell Wagner that she’d rather go hungry than eat his cooking, and she certainly wasn’t feeling up to it now. Instead she sat down quietly across the table and glumly moved a serving of egg-shaped rubber and slightly burnt, yet soggy toast onto a chipped ceramic plate. Wagner mumbled a distracted greeting from behind the newsletter he read every morning. It contained, besides news, personalized orders from the king himself. She had looked on occasion, but never found anything to explain why he was always so fixated on them.

“I’ve got good news,” he said through a mouth full of eggs.

She looked up curiously; neither of them were morning people, so they usually finished breakfast without forming any coherent sentences. On top of that, she couldn't imagine what he could have any news about; it often seemed like the military was so large just for show...they very rarely did much of anything. Outside of the military, she knew he was a terrible cook and an awkward conversationalist, and as far as she could tell his only hobby was whatever task he had been assigned. She spent most of her time being tutored or sneaking around, so unless the good news was that she had broken her previous record of not getting caught in some restricted area he probably wasn't referring to that.

"I was able to talk King Ajax out of decommissioning an old Sabre Tiger," he said, breaking her train of thought. "It's being tuned up right now...I've got the day off to help you get used to it." He paused, trying to get a read on her expression. Even though it had been years since he first took her in, they had never really mastered the art of understanding one another. At times it seemed that Duke would have been better suited to deal with the alarming amount of mischief she managed to get into. He decided to place his bets on disappointment to be safe. "I'm sorry I couldn't find a Red Horn," he continued, scratching his chin restlessly, "Those models are considerably more expensive, and most of them are in use or damaged beyo--"

Before he could finish his sentence, she had pounced across the table and wrapped her arms around his neck in a hug. In the process, she planted her knee on her plate and it slipped off the table, almost taking her with it. He winced as her hold quickly went from 'appreciation' to 'hanging on for dear life.'

"When can we go?!" she asked, excitement boiling over from her voice.

"After you eat some breakfast," came his suffocated reply, "Piloting a zoid isn't something you want to do on an empty stomach."

She seemed to calm down almost instantly, releasing her hold on him. Stepping back, her foot landed squarely in the mess behind her, crushing her breakfast into the floor.

"Guess I'll have to make some more~" she mused, reaching for the broom.

Salirsth was famous for its efficiency and size, not its beauty. The hangar was a perfect reflection of this. Its reinforced brick walls soared hundreds of feet in every direction, broken only on one end where the gaping mouths of the entrances stood. Thanks to this it was awash in natural light, which mostly alleviated the cave syndrome much of the rest of the base suffered from. At this time of day the artificial lighting was not turned on, so there were still plenty of shadows to hide in should you be there without permission. Naturally, Raika knew every nook and cranny where she could conceal herself and watch the pilots' comings and goings, but she was careful to feign ignorance of the hangar's layout so that Wagner wouldn't get suspicious. This was a dream come true, and she didn't want to risk ruining it.

Unfortunately, the mechanics and other personnel who had the honor of trying to catch her every day were less sympathetic to her cause. She was sure Wagner would eventually notice them scowling at her, or one of them would make some quip that blew her innocence out of the water. Thankfully, it never came.

"Is the Sabre Tiger ready yet?" Wagner was talking to someone behind a service desk now. It was too tall for her to see over, or in other words, the perfect height for sneaking past unnoticed.

"I'm afraid it's about as good as it's going to get," the clerk responded. "We haven't been able to figure out what's wrong with the targeting system yet, but we think there's a number

of loose parts or something of that nature.”

Wagner glanced down at Raika, who appeared to be nervous. He figured she was worried the whole thing might be delayed.

“I’m sure we can make do without that for now.” He made sure to speak loud enough for Raika to hear him clearly, though the clerk seemed a little confused. “She’s just learning, so we can save that lesson for another day.” The clerk shrugged and tapped away at a keyboard. A moment later a printer buzzed to life and spit out a slip of paper which she handed back to Wagner. After thanking her, he headed back towards the front of the hangar with Raika in tow.

The sight of Wagner’s Red Horn, almost within an arm’s reach to the left of the suspended walkway, was enough to chase off all worry about being turned in. Normally, she waited until he was long gone before sneaking around, so she hadn’t ever seen it up close. There were other Red Horns in the hangar, of course, but none of them were as well kept or outfitted as his. After all, he *was* a Saber, one of the King’s four elite soldiers.

In retrospect, Wagner thought, having her old and worn-down Sabre Tiger placed right next to his pristine Red Horn probably wasn’t going to help. Regrettably, the time to correct that had long since passed.

“Your Tiger is right over here.” he said, pointing to the right.

It took her a few seconds to respond. When she did turn around, however, she didn’t seem disappointed at all. This Sabre Tiger was a bare model; no upgrades or additional weaponry. It was modeled after a smilodon, or saber-toothed tiger as they were commonly called, a fact verified by its signature fangs. For weaponry, it had a small, retractable twin beam cannon on its back and a thick, three-barreled cannon on the underside of its body. The dull red coat it

sported seemed exceedingly lackluster next to the freshly painted Red Horn. Nevertheless, almost tripping over herself, Raika made a dash for the controls linked up to the zoid. Within seconds she had the cockpit open and was trying to figure out how to jump high enough to let down the bridge that would get her there.

“Did you learn how to do that in school?” Wagner asked as he unhooked the bridge for her.

She paused for a second before replying, “Yes?”

Before he could warn her not to, she raced across the platform before it was fully down and jumped into the cockpit. It was different than the diagrams of the Red Horn she had studied diligently, but she was sure she had seen something like it before. On either side of her were the sliders, a handle that could be pushed forward or backward along a track to control the rate at which the legs on that side moved and in what direction. They could be pulled up or down to jump or crouch as well. Each of them sported a button on the end of the handle hooked up to the firearms. At her feet were pedals which gave her more control over the movement of the front two legs and directly in front of her sat a control panel idly displaying assorted information. The seat and sliders had been adjusted much lower than normal so she could reach everything comfortably.

“Oh hey! Raika!” a familiar voice called from the walkway. She froze. There was no way this could be good. Quickly, she searched the control panel for a way to close the cockpit and found it.

“I guess she didn’t hear me...” the shooting range instructor said, mostly to himself, as the orange tinted lid came down.

“She’s been a little beside herself with excitement,” Wagner explained. “She’s finally getting her own zoid.”

“Oh, that’s cool...she was supposed to start attending my class this afternoon, but it won’t kill her to catch up later.” He flashed a cheesy, double thumbs up towards the now shut cockpit before giving Wagner a friendly slap on the shoulder. “You two have fun~”

Wagner couldn’t help but wonder what else she might have forgotten about. With a sigh he stepped over to his Red Horn and pulled up a communications channel with the Sabre Tiger. A rectangle popped up to his far left showing Raika exploring her cockpit. She apparently didn’t notice the similar video feed in her own cockpit just yet.

“You seem to be a natural at this,” he rumbled, a little louder than he really wanted to.

Raika jumped and straightened up, looking around for the source of the voice. Even after she spotted him, she seemed unsure of what to do. After a few false starts, she offered, “Yeah. You know...school. They’ve really been stepping it up lately.”

“Have they taught you the basic controls?” he asked, though he was almost sure he knew the answer already.

Her face broke into a devilish smile as she grabbed both sliders. With a forward push the Tiger lunged into motion, sending mechanics and anyone else unfortunate enough to be on the ground level scurrying away to safety. Within seconds she had disappeared into a cloud of dust outside the hangar.

He was only marginally sorry he asked. Even before he got this whole adventure set up, he knew he was going to be in over his head. As part of preparing for it, he had warned everyone on duty to be extra careful lest she do something reckless.

“Where do you want to go first?” he asked as he got moving after her.

“Uh...”

“How about the targeting range?”

She flinched. Today was the first day of her handgun targeting class. Oh well. She hadn’t really been looking forward to spending hours shooting rubber bullets at paper targets anyway. At least, it couldn’t compare to the thrill of actually piloting a zoid.

“Is that a yes?” Wagner’s deep voice crashed into her thoughts once again.

“Yeah, sure.”

The zoid shooting range was pretty similar to the handgun variant in terms of the cheap targets and fake ammunition, but instead of small arms she got to use weapons capable of blowing the entire school wing up.

At Wagner’s suggestion, Raika lined up to shoot first. The mark she was aiming for was a classic red circle set up a moderate distance away in an otherwise uninterrupted stretch of rock and sand. Her Sabre Tiger wasn’t equipped with any spectacular weaponry, just the shock cannons and the beam cannon. She could see another gun mounted on the tail, but for the life of her she couldn’t figure out how to fire it. Even so, this mark was too far away for the shock cannons to be of any use, so she carefully lined up the sights of her beam cannon and cautiously hit the trigger.

The shot went wide, zooming harmlessly off to the right and inflicting negligible damage on a rock that had clearly weathered many more powerful blasts.

“That was pretty close!” Wagner chimed in, trying to be encouraging. He had half-expected her to go buck wild and

try to shoot everything at once.

Raika adjusted her targeting reticule to the left. She had spent countless hours reading about Red Horns but it wasn't helping her much here. They usually had extravagant targeting systems capable of almost completely replacing the need for a pilot. If all you wanted was a stationary artillery platform, then the pilot's only job was to choose when to start firing and when to stop. Manual fire had been covered in a few appendixes here and there, but it was only for backup and hadn't gone into much detail. Nevertheless, she was sure this wouldn't be *that* hard to figure out.

This time the beam zipped well above the target and was lost to the noon horizon.

Wagner chuckled gently, "I think you may have over-adjusted that time." he said. Raika didn't answer him but a look of grim determination crept over her face. He paused, hoping she wouldn't do anything crazy. "Tell you what, why don't you keep firing while you adjust so you can get used to how much you have to change your aim?"

Without a word she began to fire a beam off every second, but instead of a straight volley the shots flew all over the range.

"Slow down a bit!" came Wagner's thunderous voice.

"I'm not moving anything..." she replied, her words heavy with frustration. Sure enough, her hand was steady. The only movement in her cockpit was the rhythmic up and down of her trigger finger. The beam cannon seemed to have a mind of its own, adjusting its aim after nearly every shot.

"Well, he did mention something being wrong with the cannon's targeting system...but I didn't think it would be anything like this." Wagner admitted slowly. "Let's forget about it for now, maybe some melee practice in the canyon would be better."

Raika stopped firing. "Just how old is this thing?" she asked in a half-curious, half-accusatory tone.

"Old enough that you're free to take it out whenever you like." Wagner responded. It had taken him several hours to perfect that response to her inevitable question. By all appearances it had worked, too. Without a word she headed back to the entrance of the range.

How the 'canyon' had earned that name was a story no living person could recall, but it stuck steadfast. Everyone knew it was truly a large crack left in the continent in the aftermath of some tectonic movement, but 'the fissure' just didn't have the same staying power. It ran from the outskirts of Salirsth all the way to the Olympian mountains that made up the western boundary of the country. Somehow, the name had to come to include the surrounding area too, despite it being no more turbulent than the rest of the rocky landscape.

The ground above the actual fissure was littered with the remains of clay targets that had been the unfortunate practice marks for skilled, or lucky, pilots. Several of their surviving brethren were still set up here and there.

As soon as they were cleared, Raika took off at full speed towards the target field. She had been painfully quiet the entire way over, a tell-tale sign that the day was not turning out how she wanted it to. Wagner's hope was waning; perhaps there had been too many little things gone wrong for this outing to be as memorable as he was planning.

The satisfying cracking sound the target made as it shattered under the Sabre Tiger's claws almost completely made up for the targeting range bust. Red Horns were competent melee zoids, but being as huge and bulky as they were, they usually dealt with enemies by way of weaponry. At close-range, they only had their horns to rely on, outside of simply ramming

themselves into whatever unfortunate zoid left itself open. It was rare, for that reason, to find a book about them that focused on melee. Despite not being very knowledgeable about it, Raika was irresistibly attracted to the rush of feeling the entire zoid move at her command...the agile yet powerful metal body responded perfectly to her input. In a matter of minutes, every target in sight had been devoured by her teeth and claws.

"Heeeeey! Not bad!" Raika jumped as another video feed popped into existence on the opposite side of her cockpit from Wagner. She had seen the dark-haired man inside of it before, but she was sure she had never talked to him. From what she could see of his uniform, it was identical to Wagner's...which meant he must also be a Saber. There used to be a plaque on the kitchen wall with pictures of all four Sabers before one of Wagner's more heinous cooking accidents, and while her memory was fuzzy, she did remember names. There were two men and two women, meaning that this guy had to be-

"Sinfire?" Wagner's surprised voice echoed across her cockpit. "I thought you were stationed in Ligory today?"

"I guess that's where I'm supposed to be, but I had someone else take my place," Sinfire answered while folding his arms guiltily behind his head. "Angela had a race earlier today, and I wouldn't miss it for the world, ya know?"

Wagner clearly didn't approve, but he saved his reprimand for later. "Well, since you're here...mind giving Raika some pointers in melee combat? My Red Horn is a poor fit for a demonstration."

"And it's a pleeeeeasure to meet you, Miss Raika." Sinfire turned back to Raika as if Wagner was no longer there. "Whatever you want to learn, you only have to say th-" He stopped and straightened up. "Oh, Raika? You're that daughter Sir Tightwad always talks about, huh? My offer still

stands, as long as you're nicer to me than him, hah."

Wagner opened his mouth in protest, but didn't say anything. He was already having second thoughts about leaving her in the care of this man. Todd Baker, a.k.a. Sinfire, had been a Saber long before Wagner had even considered the position. He was tried and true, reliable, but still a showman in every sense of the word. It wasn't unlikely he'd try to coax her into doing something dangerous that would ultimately get her hurt.

"Oh, by the way, old man," Todd started, ignoring the fact that, in his mid-forties, he was Wagner's senior by at least a decade, "King Ajax wanted you for something, didn't say what."

"Oh?" Wagner cocked an eyebrow. "I suppose I should see to that immediately. Keep an eye on her for me, and for once, Todd, try not to do anything reckless?"

Todd's grin threatened to split his face clean apart. Raika eyed him uneasily, but she knew that his Lightning Saix was a much better fit for melee combat than Wagner's Red Horn. It was a sleek, black zoid with gray and red markings modeled after a cheetah and boasting amazing acceleration and speed for a machine of its size. Thanks to this it was much more agile than the Red Horn. As far as ranged weaponry was concerned it had only a large pulse laser mounted on its back that remained stationary to avoid throwing off its balance at high speeds. Either way it mattered little. Wagner was off to see the King after a hasty farewell and a warning over a private channel not to listen to everything Todd said.

"Hah, I can't believe he still falls for that one," Todd blurted out as he burst into laughter. "That's got to be the third or fourth time I've done it to him...didn't even change up the delivery." He sobered, sitting up in his seat. "It's kind of sad, really."

Raika's expression soured. This Sinfire didn't seem like a very trustworthy guy. Still, if she called Wagner back, she would be in for the dullest melee combat lesson ever inflicted on a willing student.

"Soooo..." Sinfire started, "Where should we start? This is your first time piloting, right?"

"Let's skip the basics," Raika responded flatly. It occurred to her that her definition of 'skipping the basics' would probably translate to 'let's see how fast you can get me killed' to him. Judging by the monstrous grin that leered back at her she was right to be suspicious.

Over the next few hours, during which time Wagner was likely trying to explain to the King's bodyguards why he had made a beeline for him without being summoned, Sinfire taught her how to make sharp turns, strike with any available appendage and dodge without leaving herself open. She had even managed to devise a few counter attacks. It was unclear whether he was genuinely impressed or if the praise he showered on her sprung from his persistently awkward, flirtatious demeanor.

"Well, once you master all of that you'll be as good as anyone." He said, yawning and bringing his Lightning Saix to a halt. "I could teach you some other stuff, but it's not super necessary. Just tricks, ya know? Great for leaving an impression on the important ones!" He winked and stretched his arms.

"Are any of these tricks remotely useful in combat?" She asked, trying not to sound too interested.

"Well, maybe, circumstantially..." He leaned forward, looking more serious than he had all day. A hand came up to stroke his chin thoughtfully. "If you ever find yourself

fighting in a narrow canyon, knowing how to ricochet off the walls can be incredibly useful."

Raika was not entirely convinced. Nevertheless, she followed him down into the fissure. The solid, rock walls on either side loomed in stoic silence, blocking most sunlight from reaching them. The resulting shade was unnerving...this seemed like the perfect place to get into some life threatening accident and never be found. If Sinfire felt the same way, it was completely hidden by the look of anticipation on his face.

"Well, it's pretty simple once you get the hang of it..." He started.

"Isn't everything? By definition?" Raika interrupted.

He laughed, the look of excitement never leaving his eyes. "The problem most people have is they try to jump straight out on the wall. Never works! Your enemy is gravity, so you want to put most of your 'umph' into jumping *up*. It doesn't take a whole lot to get to the other wall so just make sure you angl--"

Raika wasn't interested in another lecture. He had already given her all the information she needed; now he was just 'being friendly' or whatever he called it. She pushed her Sabre Tiger into a run then jumped onto the left wall. She made sure to lean hard to the right so as to position her feet squarely on the near vertical surface.

It didn't work. She hit it at a sharp angle; the Tiger's left legs touched the wall but didn't get any solid footing while the right legs never made contact at all. She barely managed a clumsy landing.

"Geeez, you're nothing like your old man." Sinfire remarked with an air of surprise in his voice. "The walls aren't so crazy a little further in; you should practice there before you take on these suckers."

Setting her jaw, Raika headed further down the canyon without responding. Behind her, Sinfire was making good time jumping from wall to wall. It almost seemed as if he was flying in a daring zigzag since he barely touched them before pushing off again. He wasn't even trying to measure the strength of his leaning to get a good angle on the wall; instead he threw himself at it with enough horizontal force that he was able to firmly plant all four of the Lightning Saix's legs. With that platform he had no problem jumping up and off to the other wall.

Without hesitation she picked up speed, edging to the right of the canyon. If Sinfire noticed he offered no words of warning. Suddenly, she veered left and flung her Tiger full force at the wall. With a satisfying thud she managed to hit it feet first, then jumped up and away. She pushed off harder with her right legs in order to make the necessary rotation to hit the other side with her feet rather than slam into it back first.

At first, it seemed to work beautifully. The rotation was a little unsettling but she made the whole half turn. As she reached the right wall, however, she realized she was barely above the ground. Concentrating, she hunched forward and bared her teeth in a frustrated growl. Her feet hit the wall squarely and she jumped again, this time aiming to go much higher.

Again, her efforts initially seemed successful, but as she approached the left wall it became clear that she had launched at another ill-fated angle. She peaked at a better height, but at that point she was barely over halfway there. Her Tiger landed in the corner the wall made with the ground and she made a stumbling recovery into a run.

"You've almost got it!" Sinfire's encouragement came as he zoomed gracefully past overhead.

Raika couldn't help but smile.

Third

None of the other kids in the Salirsth military academy really bothered to talk to Raika. She never made much effort to talk to them either. The others had mostly grown up together, and even though she had been introduced into the class years ago, no one seemed interested at all. She didn't give much thought as to why, or at least, she tried to appear as if it didn't concern her at all. It had something to do with her looks anyway, she was pretty sure, and she couldn't change those. Her hair was in a perpetual state of distress, being too short to tie into much of a ponytail and too haphazard to lend itself to any other styles. Her eyes were a deep black compared to the grays, blues, greens and hazels of their own. She was also shorter than most of them and somewhat skinny. To top it off, even her new clothes looked like hand-me-downs, because Wagner had no idea how to shop and she had no desire to.

Consequently, she had no one to voice her suspicions to that noodles were *not* a proper breakfast food. She also couldn't ask if it was normal for them to be both slightly singed and somewhat undercooked. Fortunately, or unfortunately, she was pretty certain that fish wasn't a usual companion to pasta. On the bright side, fish was the one thing Wagner could actually cook well. No matter what kind, he knew exactly how to prepare them to maximize on flavor and texture. Today's fish was delicately fried and sat in stark contrast on top of the brutalized strings.

Even before he spoke, she could tell Wagner wanted to announce something by his lack of interest in his newsletter. He was just waiting for his cue, so she cut off a small piece of fish and ate it carefully, not wanting to be surprised if he had messed up on it for once.

"I was talking to Captain Borton the other day." He began,

clearing his throat uncomfortably. "He heads up the minor assignments, the ones the main military doesn't need to get involved with. Anyway, he says he'd love to have you join his force, if you're interested."

Raika stared blankly back at him, fish still in mouth. Her fork hung limply from her hand, forgotten.

"You're a very good pilot for your age," he continued. "I'm sure it won't be anything you can't handle." It was pretty obvious he didn't fully believe that last part. "He wants you to meet him in the 191st conference room about half an hour from now."

Raika jolted back into action, hurriedly shoving the biggest possible chunks of fish into her mouth as she could. As soon as she finished it, she jumped up from the table and sprinted for the door. She shot a quick farewell back as she went.

"Hey!" Wagner called after her. "Your noodles!"

The location of the conference rooms wasn't something students learned in class, but for someone who spent as much time sneaking around the base as she did they were nearly impossible to miss. There were 300 of them total on three floors, stacked directly above each other. They were lined up by the hundred in a colossal half circle of a hallway on each floor; the middle numbered rooms sat so deep in that they were mainly used for storage so they didn't have to be maintained. The hallway was open on both ends and the first 25 or so rooms on each side actually saw occasional use. Still, no one could offer any believable reason for having so many of them.

On the floor outside the entrance to the 191st room sat half of a small sign carved in stone. It was upside down but she could still make out that it read "19". The door itself was

propped open with the other half. Above the entrance, there was a bright spot where it must have hung at some point. The light spilling out into the somewhat dim hallway made it clear the room was in use, but there wasn't any sound to accompany it. Peering in, there seemed to be only two people present, sitting at desks located on opposite ends of the space. One was Captain Duke Borton, an eternally relaxed man who managed to effortlessly intimidate everyone around him. He seemed *too* calm, as if every situation was completely in his control at all times. It didn't help that he was often called on by the King to handle the kind of situations no one was allowed to talk about. The other was a girl just a few years older than Raika. She was furiously chewing the end off of a pencil as she worked at some paper lying in front of her. Her straight, black hair cascaded gently past her shoulders, framing a face that was contorted into an expression of distressed focus. Her cheeks seemed a little too robust, as if she was blowing them out a little. Raika was certain she was not in the same class as the girl, yet she couldn't shake a feeling of familiarity.

"And here I thought you weren't gonna show," Duke said teasingly. He leaned forward in his seat and placed his arms on the desk before him, managing to make the motion seem simultaneously involved and effortless.

Raika stared at him silently. She had long ago learned that any sort of conversation with him would inevitably turn against her at some point. The path of least suffering lay in saying as little as possible.

Duke smiled, a gesture that was sure to disturb even the most steel-nerved of soldiers. This kid had already learned what had evaded Wagner for years. He pulled out a sheet of paper and motioned for her to take it. "It's an entrance exam," he explained.

She took it and stood waiting in silence. After a brief moment, Duke handed her a pencil and she sat down at one

of the empty desks to inspect the test. It seemed plain; just a few lines printed out without any sort of numbering or even a space to write her name. The questions didn't seem relevant to each other or to piloting or to the military either. One was asking who the fourth king of Hilvara was; another wanted to know how many individual peaks were in the Olympian range. The rest were about equally arcane subjects. She rolled her eyes and set to work answering "I don't know" for all of them.

She started, and finished, as the other girl was handing her exam back to Duke.

"I think I did ok," she was saying. "I didn't know there was going to be a test, though..."

Duke grinned. He accepted her paper without a word and seamlessly slipped it into the trash bin beside his desk without so much as a look. The girl's expression changed from worry to alarm as she stood shocked in front of him. She didn't notice Raika walking up beside her.

Raika didn't pretend to understand what Duke was up to but she wasn't opposed to the idea of him not seeing her exam. She crumpled it up and tossed it to the bin herself, but he caught it as if he had been expecting that all along. He took his time opening it up then laughed audibly when he saw it. He stuck it in a drawer and turned to face his class.

"I'll meet you at storage unit B14." He said, rising from his chair. He strode calmly to the door without any further instruction and disappeared into the hallway.

For a moment, neither student said anything. Raika was annoyed that Duke had, yet again, gotten the better of her. The other girl seemed almost on the verge of tears, managing to hold them back only because she was so confused. Eventually, Raika headed for the door herself. She had no idea what storage unit B14 was, but she wasn't about to

concede defeat over something like that.

"Wait!" the other girl's quivering voice beckoned from behind. She hurried over, rubbing her eyes with a sleeve and trying to get a handle on herself. "Where are we going? What's a storage B14...thing?"

Raika stared at her blankly. "I don't know..." she replied, and immediately wished she hadn't. She doubted she'd ever be able to say that again without hearing Duke's laugh in her head.

Nevertheless, her answer seemed to comfort her classmate a little. The girl took a deep breath and extended her hand. "My name is Angela," she said, in a slightly firmer voice than before. "Let's get going, I can ask my dad about it over the radio."

"Who's your dad?" Raika asked, completely forgetting to shake her hand.

"Sinfire." Angela replied, "He's out doing reconnaissance right now, but he usually doe--"

"He's married?!" Raika exclaimed, her jaw lingering open. None of the other Sabers were even in a relationship, as far as she knew. Wagner didn't seem to have time for one, and the other two seemed to keep to themselves. It had appeared, despite her technically being a part of Wagner's family, that the Sabers were destined to remain alone.

Angela jumped slightly, not expecting an outburst like that. She settled just as quickly but a pained look came over her face. "Yeah...sort of, anyway." She answered, her gaze falling towards the floor. All semblance of the confidence she had worked up dissipated.

"Well, go ahead and ask him, I guess." Raika said with a shrug, turning back to the door and heading for the hangar.

Angela followed in silence, her expression still gloomy.

Despite being something of a flustered mess in the classroom, Angela turned out to be a skilled Lightning Saix pilot like her father. Once in the cockpit she even seemed to grow a spine. She had contacted him as soon as they had left Salirsth and relayed to Raika that they only needed to head northwest for a few minutes to reach the storage depot. They were looking for a clay building with a bright orange ring around the top. Neither of them attempted conversation during the trip.

Duke was, as promised, waiting near the depot. His Shadow Fox was crouched to one side of it and he was resting in the shade it offered. As they approached, he stood up slowly, successfully implying he had been waiting some time but without admitting a thread of fatigue. He stood grinning as the two stopped, climbed out of their cockpits, then warily walked over to him.

"I was afraid I had scared you off," Duke lied, still grinning. Angela shifted nervously, but Raika simply waited for him to continue, a familiar look of annoyance settling in her eyes. "This unit's lock has been compromised, and someone has been routinely stealing supplies over the past week," he went on, taking a more serious tone. "Your assignment is to stake out the surrounding area and apprehend the culprit if he returns."

Raika looked surprised in spite of herself.

Before she could act, however, Angela's shocked voice cut in. "An assignment?!" Duke's grin widened. "But..."

"We don't know if the thief is military or not, so we weren't able to give you the details ahead of time," Duke continued. "We'll take care of explaining the situation to your parents or guardians."

"By which you mean lying to them," Raika said accusingly.

"Of course."

There was a moment of silence between them before Duke picked up a basket at his feet and handed it to the two new recruits. "Lunch," he said. "And dinner too, if you're careful." Raika took it grudgingly while Angela stood in stunned silence.

Thankfully, Wagner hadn't played a hand in fixing their food. Then again, it was clear that it wasn't the work of any culinary artist either. The basket had contained four sandwiches constructed simply of meat, cheese and lettuce. Raika had eaten one of them for lunch and would have had another if Angela hadn't insisted they save most of the food for dinner, something about being ready to fight if they had to. They moved their zoids out of sight in case the thief did any scouting, and passed the time in the shadow of a huge rock formation. Angela was armed with a small library of books in her cockpit which she was more than glad to share, but Raika was content with re-reading her Sabre Tiger's manual.

By the time night fell, Raika had familiarized herself with every nut and bolt of the machine. She was used to manuals; they were what she normally read when she wasn't exploring the base, but the anticipation of the pending assignment was starting to drive her insane.

Angela, on the other hand, had barely made a dent in her collection. Absentmindedly, she nibbled on the last of the sandwiches as she read. They had eaten dinner about half an hour earlier. She had let Raika have most of the sandwiches and instead eaten the pickles and sourdough her mother had packed for her. It wasn't unusual for entire days to pass with her nose buried in a book, and she was looking forward

to spending the better part of the night finishing up the series she was currently reading. Unfortunately, her reading marathon was abruptly interrupted by Raika's excited voice.

"Did you hear that?!" she shouted, a rectangle showing her practically bursting out of her seat appearing on the glass of Angela's cockpit. She had jumped up as if whatever the sound was had rescued her from some dreary doom. Even now she was peering around as if she might actually see something in the dark...from behind the rock.

"Hold on..." Angela murmured. She lowered her book, a thrilling account of a Dunravien prince on a quest for the throne, in order to glance at her radar. Sure enough, a medium sized dot was moving steadily closer. Reluctantly, she sat up. "Whoever it is, they're here," she announced with obvious reservation, then added after taking note of Raika's reckless excitement, "but before we start shooting, let's make sure it's no one we know, ok?"

Raika was ready to fire on anything that gave her an excuse to after such painful wait, but regardless she agreed to allow Angela to gather more info on the target. It was nearly beyond the ability of her willpower to sit still on the verge of her first combat assignment. Or at least, she hoped it was a combat assignment...if the thief gave up without a fight she might just knock him around anyway out of spite.

The sudden widening of Angela's eyes gave her all the message she needed before any verbal warning could be uttered. Her hands flew to the controls and she pushed her Tiger into action. As she sped clear of the rocks, she could see a zoid modeled after a wolf, aptly called a Command Wolf, seemingly standing on alert near the depot. It was smaller than her Sabre Tiger or Angela's Lightning Saix, but it was armed with a rifle mounted on its back that ran almost the full length of its body. It looked as if it had once been a deep purple, but that was difficult to visualize with all the scratches and sand that covered it now. Only a few patches

of the original color remained, and those were littered with various markings that didn't make any sense to her. At any rate, it was obvious this was the thief...or at least not a military unit, and therefore she wouldn't get into trouble for beating it into the ground.

"Stand down!" She heard Angela call. "You are under arrest by the Salirsth special forces!"

The Wolf's pilot didn't seem interested in being arrested, though they had clearly been caught by surprise. They turned their zoid to face Raika, rifle pointing directly at her, as she seemed much more eager to attack than the hesitant Lightning Saix that had spotted them.

Despite having repeatedly read the guide her father had pointed out to her for handling this kind of situation, Angela found herself somewhere between panic and breaking into tears. In a moment of clarity, she forced contact between the thief, herself and Raika. The latter seemed confused at first, but not nearly as much as the thief himself. He appeared to be in his late teens, maybe a little older. His clothes were clean and only slightly wrinkled, and his thin face was freshly shaven. He wore a red and white headband to keep his contrastingly unruly, light purple hair at bay. Only after the three had sat in tense silence for near half a minute did she realize she had forgotten to encrypt the outgoing image so he could see just how unsettled she really was.

"The Salirsth special forces, huh..." he said, obviously unimpressed. "Is this some kind of school project? Accosting the innocent in the dark of the night?"

"Do we really have to talk to him?" Raika asked impatiently.

"We're supposed to give him a fair chance to surrender," Angela whispered back, despite the fact that the thief would hear it just as loud as Raika.

“Well, I’m not going to just turn myself in,” the boy said, sounding annoyed. “And I doubt I can outrun the both of you, so my only real choice...” His voice trailed off, as if he had realized something.

With an earsplitting crack, he fired his rifle directly at one of the Lightning Saix’s legs, nearly splitting it in half. Instinctively, Angela’s hands flew to her controls to stabilize her zoid. She managed to avoid falling over, but there was no hope of maneuvering or running at any respectable speed with a leg out of commission. Surprisingly, rather than fear, she felt only resentment at his underhanded attack.

“Well, Raika...” she said between clinched teeth, “I guess you’ve got your wish, have fun.”

A second shot narrowly missed Raika’s Sabre Tiger as she sprang forward and to her right, crossing in between the Lightning Saix and the Command Wolf. The Wolf backed up slowly, trying to line up a shot at the same time. The boy waited until she was passing the depot, so she’d only have one direction to dodge in, then let loose two rounds in quick succession: one directly at her and the other to her side that didn’t have a building in the way of escape. Without missing a beat she launched her Tiger into the air and firmly planted her feet on the wall of the depot. The first shot passed harmlessly underneath her and the second was nowhere close. Launching herself off of the building she landed, claws first, on the Wolf’s back. It crumpled under her weight, and with one leg keeping it pinned she tore its rifle apart with her teeth and slammed her other front leg into its back repeatedly.

“Alright, I give!” the boy shouted over the sound of metal crushing metal. “Lay off already!”

“So...disappointing...” Raika mused, her voice still somewhat unsteady from the excitement of it all. She stopped beating on the Command Wolf, but left a leg on it to prevent it from moving. Taking a deep breath, she turned

to address Angela. “So, what now? Mission accomplished, right? Do we have to stay here and baby-sit him until the rest of the base wakes up?”

“No, I already contacted them. They should be on their way now; we’ll see them in...maybe ten minutes?” Angela busied herself running a damage analysis on her Lightning Saix’s leg. Hopefully she’d be able to repair it in time for the race a few days from now. “If I were you, I’d be thinking of some way to explain the damage to the depot.”

Looking back, Raika noticed the deep impressions her Sabre Tiger’s feet had left on the building’s exterior. She smirked. As far as she was concerned, any punishment would be *completely* worth it.

Stompy

Zoids

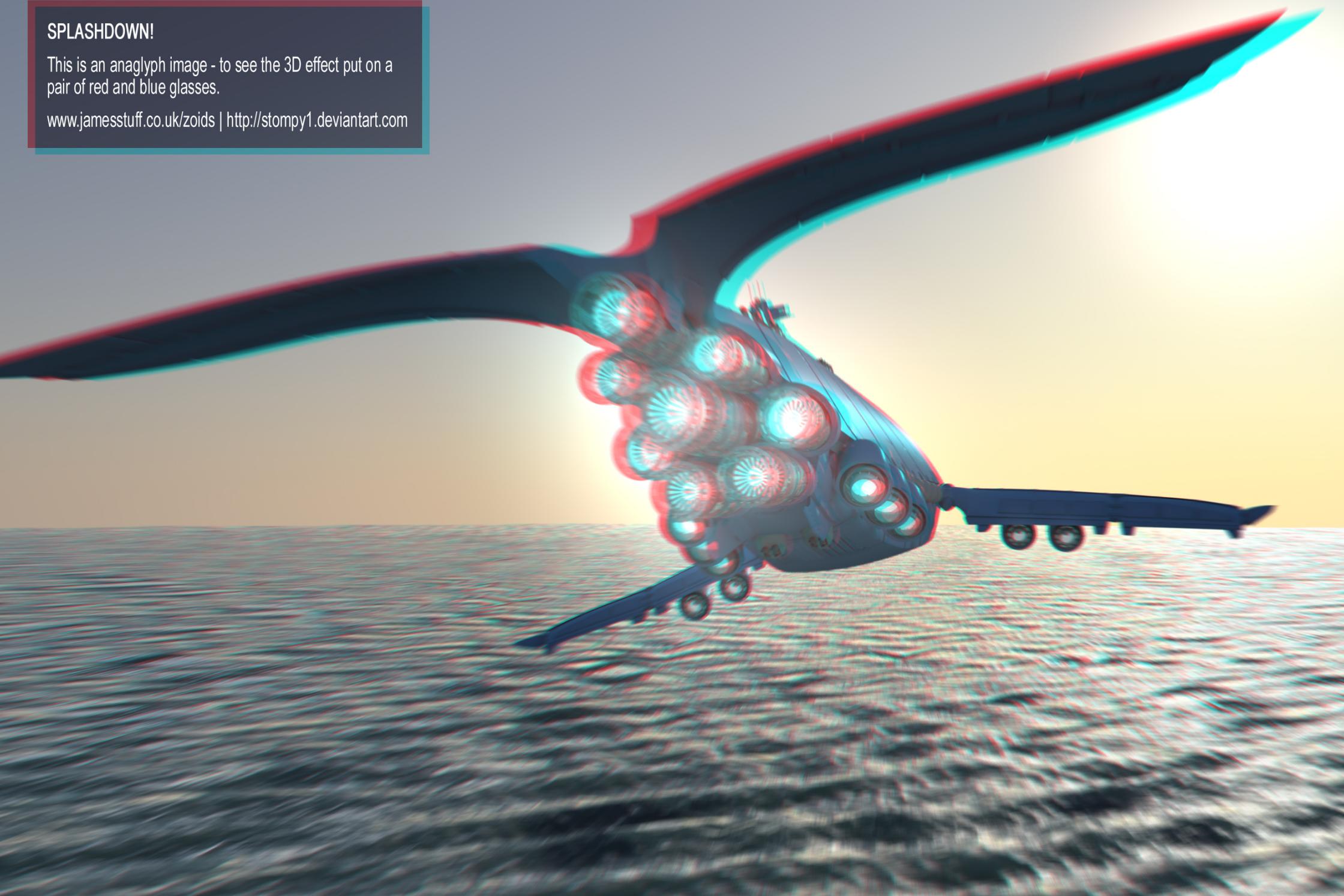
www.jamesstuff.co.uk | stompy1.deviantart.com



SPLASHDOWN!

This is an anaglyph image - to see the 3D effect put on a pair of red and blue glasses.

www.jamesstuff.co.uk/zoids | <http://stompy1.deviantart.com>



Krark flies, Zoidstar beneath and night above. His mind seeks, as always, to bridge the two, and as he passes the wreck of the Celeste his thoughts stray to the humans within. They are trapped and fragile, but they fell from the skies, and they yet survive.

He waits for their fellows—surely, no warrior race can resist such soldiers as his. Like he is there when the red Zoids land, he will meet them, and they will listen. The Zoidaryans saw Zoids as tools. As it was their undoing, it will make humankind his vehicle to the stars.

Redhorn bothers not with philosophy or the universe. To him, Zoidstar is the universe, and things continue to unfold as he wants. Zoidzilla remains dead, and Krark wastes his time talking. Mammoth talked too much, and like Mammoth, Krark is a dreamer...his thoughts are lost in conquest while the planet is still plagued with blues.

What leader would take an army out conquering when his own home is divided? Not Redhorn. If there is any merit to Krark's delusions, Redhorn will deal with him as he has all who stood in his way, and take Krark's spoils for his own.

Scavenger does not rest. Not while there is work to be done, and there is forever work. How, he asks, can the great wars continue without him to return the warriors to the battlefield?

Others call him unusual, he would say visionary. Oh, the factories might replicate Zoids, or even create new life...but they have no imagination. No soul. When Scavenger rebuilds Zoids, they are not only stronger, they are *unique*.

Forgotten in the depths of one of his many parts caches, buried under parts of the Black Zoid and the dead it left behind, a mechanical hand twitches.

Zunder, by contrast, is truly alone. The android watches the same sky, the Zoid's neck craned back to give full view to the blue moon traversing the sky.

"He only wanted to watch the end of the world. Now the world's gone and survived, and he's dead," Zunder tells the moon, as if the Zoids in the factories he knows lie above can hear. Will the red Zoids that fall to Zoidstar now ally with Krark, will they follow the recently-reborn Redhorn?

Rebelliously, Zunder finds he doesn't care. He has but one question:

"Who can I talk to now?"

Rosa Lauri travels light.

She has a sword, an old Helic military-issue blade kept ready at her hip in a way that's half sentimental and half intimidation; the roads she walks are isolated, and not always friendly. In her own pack, tucked in an oilskin bag and nestled amid practical gear, are four books.

The rest is food, water, and medical supplies, carried in saddlebags—because Rosa isn't alone. Her Battlerover treads obediently on rein alongside, kept in the finest repair other than the grit streaking its legs and purple-blue armor. It lacks insignia other than the manufacturer's safety warnings and a decal proclaiming it *runner ornitholestes*. She's just as anonymous on sight: her blue-grey clothing is typical of the area, long and flowing and tucked into fingerless gloves and old leather boots. Her hair's tied back, and she wears a bandanna over her mouth and nose to catch the dust. It clings to her face in the morning cold.

This spring has come late and dry, but with it comes proof the soil still lives. As Rosa strays from the trail, the ground crunches under the Battlerover's feet and hers. They leave tracks through old plants, leaves twisted by brief spates of frost. Despite the winter's magnetic storms and their rainless lightning, some of their explorations reveal new growth.

Plants are one of the first things to return, and they've beaten her back home.

Groups of them cluster where she stops to rest, tiny leaflets and stems sheltered in the lee side of the same erratic boulders that block the wind from her eyes. She sits down alongside them, leans back into a curve in the glaciated rock, and turns her face to the sky before closing her eyes. Breathing deep, she runs her fingers along the starts of violets, pasqueflower, sand phlox...they're the flowers of her childhood, ones she knows from touch and smell alone.

When she was little, her mother always made time for Rosa to experience the world outside of the lessons befitting a councilwoman's children. She and her sister would walk the fields and the hills along the farms, joining the kids playing in the steppe grasses that carpeted the hills beyond the irrigation ditches.

Plants she doesn't recognize catch her attention too, carried in as unwitting seed-passengers by Zoid traffic in all the years she's been gone. Few people will recognize *her* either, not this far from the capital.

Her smile is thin, the slight curve of chapped lips hidden behind fabric, but it reaches her eyes for the first time in a long while.

She's had enough of Helic; or, more accurately, had enough of other people's memories of him. Her own are pleasant, personal...but everyone else speaks of his public face, and she remembers the man behind it, not the leader. Rosa's Helic was the one who would share dreams of peace far too idealistic for his age, and, knowing them unrealistic, his fears about where the war to achieve them led. And he was the one who kept a most terrible library of books amid the expected political and classical fare—it's the trashy ones they both laughed over that hers are picked from.

The condolences she hears for his recent death are never about him as a result, and never really for her either. They're for the first lady and about the president. History will remember them both that way. But while Rosa has been many things—a councilwoman's daughter, a bodyguard, a mother—she does not wish to be Helic's replacement.

Elena, her niece, wants to rule and reunite the continent. She's wanted to for a long time, Rosa can see in her eyes, hidden behind the proper mourning of her father and uncle. Elena talks about what could have been when she *wants* to be shaping what will be.

When Rosa thinks of what Elena will rebuild out of Helic's republic and the ashes of Zenebas' empire, she can't help but wish her brother-in-law had had the decency to die a decade earlier.

Chirrup to her left rouse Rosa from her drowsy musing, and she looks to her Battlerover, which tosses its head in gentle reminder. The sun grows lower in the sky, warning their light is limited. Rosa stands and scratches the Zoid's chin, beckoning it near enough for her to climb aboard. They're close, and better to make it before nightfall and save them another evening curled by a fire with only each other as company. The Battlerover deserves shelter and rest after so long, and she could do with a proper meal and a bath.

They wind through more rocks, then hillsides—and suddenly, the feel of the road changes, smoothens. The Battlerover's stride lengthens with it, and it takes the next hill in a skip, knowing that pavement means civilization. Rosa unties her bandanna and lets her Zoid prance past the first of the houses and farms, which spread organically out of the central parts of town farther ahead. Some windows are already lit, and other places people are still heading in under sunset's red-orange lighting.

Almost everyone along the way greets her somehow: a quick wave, a *hello, traveler*, and a few *hello, Rosas*, most hesitant. She answers every one of them, not minding the kids fussing over her Zoid or the brief catchings-up with the people old enough to have known her mother—or even her father, before he left for the military like she and her sister left for the city. They deserve the explanation, and she finds it freeing to talk with people as people again, rather than with titles before her name and formalities in their words.

The streets grow more purposeful the longer they walk, and Rosa finds herself meeting other Zoids; there's a wild Cannonfort with a bell around its neck pulling a cart, several insect types being led home by proud children who introduce

them by name before they tell her their own, and finally a Siegdober, all ice-blue metal fluff and wagging tail. It licks her hands as she leans out of the Rover's seat, and Rosa scratches it behind pointed ears.

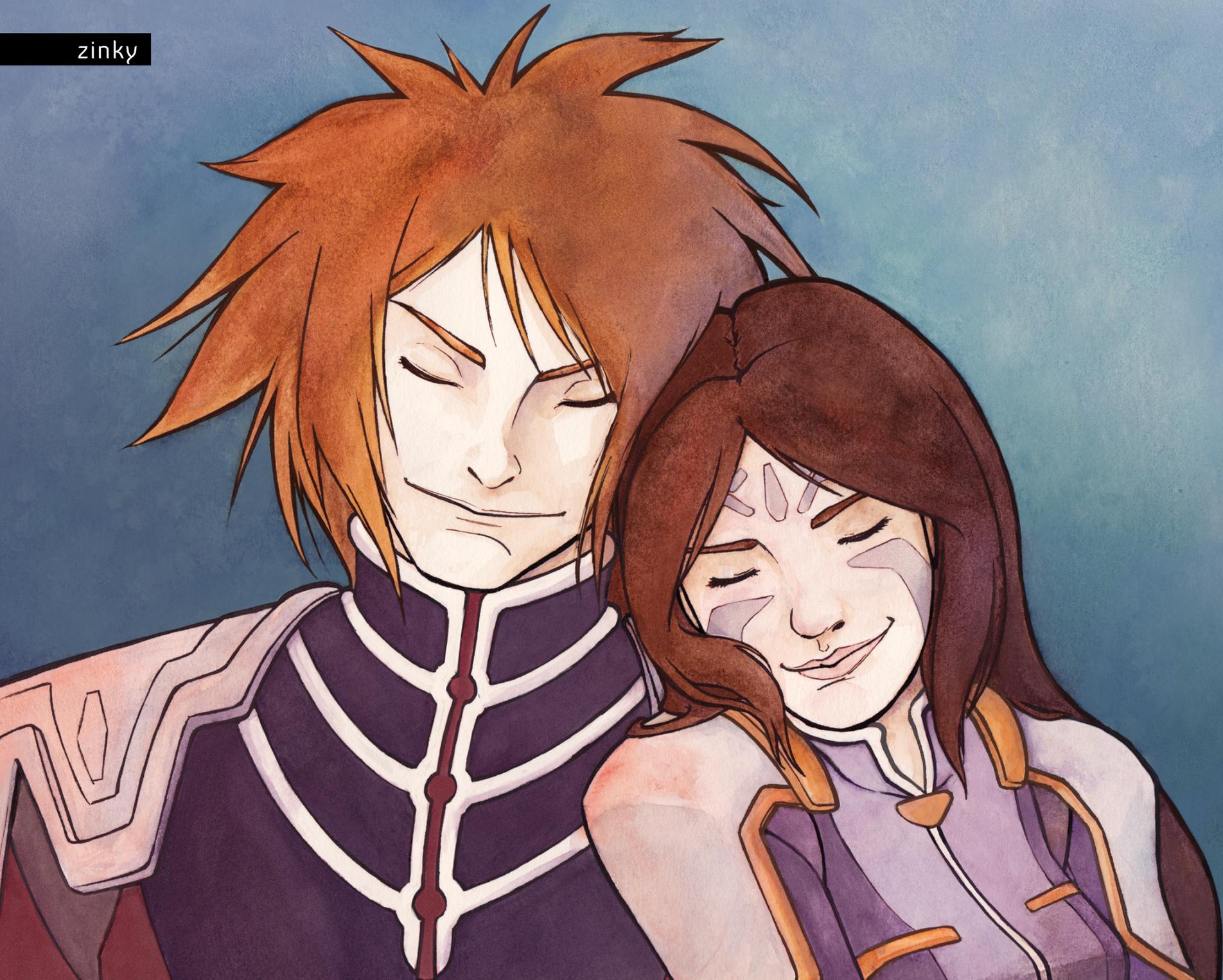
Here, a Nyxian Zoid furred in natural armor is just somebody's dog. She was the president's wife, now she's just Rosa.

She is not abandoning what she's learned, however. There are a thousand towns like hers, still rebuilding, and while she's content to leave the bigger picture to Elena, she knows direct help will be slow in coming. The people of her old hometown are out here on their own, having to band together with old trade partners and rivals—in ways fraught with more unpleasant politics now that survival's more a question. She's kept in touch, heard about the debates springing up now that the worst crisis is past.

Rosa, needless to say, has some experience with councils. And if she is not the one to take Helic's place, perhaps she can reclaim her mother's.

She spots a figure waving, a street away—and spurs the Battle Rover forward to greet her sister.

zinky



AZ

Zinou



Zero
&
Bit



One
&
Vega

Trophies

Lieutenant Matt Kansas sat amidst the cockpit of burnt circuit boards, cracked panels and half-operating controls as he piloted his Elephander westward through the southern Minhos Canyon. Warning lights flashed, monitors flickered, and a steady haze of smoke wafted about the cockpit.

Three and a half steps at a time, Matt's Elephander's pace was slow. The left front leg servo controls had been severed from the lower limb actuators. The lower left leg was now little more than a hulking mass of metal; the result of a well-placed Dibison attack. With each strained stride, the upper left leg servos were overheating. The balancing computers were continuously adjusting the actuators to keep the Zoid upright.

Matt encouraged his massive metal friend to hold steady. He looked at the chronometer. It had been nearly an hour since the last halt. The breaks the Zoid needed were increasing, and half-hour segments were lost each time. Matt hoped the Zoid would make two more miles before he'd lock the legs in an upright position.

Elephander's trunk groaned as it floated left to right, another part of the balancing computer's arsenal. The trunk weapon was long gone, the Gordosaur with Gojulas Cannons made sure of that. Not even the shield of Elephander could have withstood that frontal assault. That Gordosaur had cost Matt his squad, two more trophies for the war, two more Elephanders were not coming home today.

The blaring noise of the control panel alarms going off brought a frown to the face of Lieutenant Kansas. He looked at the status screen, already knowing what it displayed. Elephander's left leg's upper servos were failing, two miles short of his hope. He brought Elephander to a halt and set the

controls to lock the legs in position.

Matt slumped amidst the smoky haze and smell of hot silicon. He wouldn't leave the cockpit and he prepared to shut down the core. His friend was fading, and Kansas stopped the Zoid's major systems from draining any more from the core, but it was too late. The core's levels were dropping slowly, and without an injection from another core, the Zoic would fail.

Lieutenant Kansas smashed his fist against the arms of his cockpit chair. He muttered a saying he had heard long ago. "Wars weren't good for any body . . . living metal, or living flesh." And Kansas new his metal friend was becoming another trophy for the war.

Lieutenant Kansas cursed the war. He cursed the Gordosaur, the Dibisons, the President of the Republic, and finally, with hesitation, Matt cursed the Royal Family of Guylos. It gave him little relief for the grim future he and his Elephander now faced.

Matt eyed the self-destruct button that lay beneath the clear protective door. He couldn't remember what he was thinking as the communication boards chirped out a signal. Matt looked through the long-range scope mounted to the right of his chair.

On the horizon, a plume of dust wafted into the air and Matt strained his eyes into the scope. At the center of the plume, Matt recognized the outline of the front end of the Gustav as it raced across the canyon's floor toward him.

Lieutenant Kansas sighed and fell back into his command chair. His thoughts chided him. Today, the war was denied two more trophies. Today, we will live my friend." Matt brought the remaining systems off line and relieved the Zoid core of all the remaining load.

