

# Furry Skies

By Tygon Panthera

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Ah, the feeling when you enter the onboard hangar of a zeppelin. The noise of the mechanics preparing the planes to be launched, the heat, the bustling, the smell of gunpowder and fuel... Yes, that was it. That was life! At least to Lawrence "Junior" Burne and his companions of the Brazos Marauders. The tall coyote was walking through the hanger of the *Corral*, the pirate's zeppelin. He was an impressive figure. Bigger than most coyotes and outfitted with a gray coloration over which he wore black clothing that supported his pirate image. His pilot gear was no exception. A long scar on the left side of his face was a silent reminder of past battles and the leader of the Brazos Marauders could look back on quite a few of them. His career began at the tender age of 12 when he took a job at the airport close to his hometown. He had always been fascinated by planes and being surrounded by them nearly daily never changed that. As soon as he was old enough he convinced his father to get him into flight school. Law did very well there and when finished, he was hired by a small transportation company.

Then came the Crash of '29 and the company went bankrupt. When Texas seceded from the United States a few months later, Law, who at the age of 19 was still very young, enlisted into the Texas Rangers air militia. He was the youngest pilot ever to be accepted into the Rangers, earning him his nickname "Junior".

Lawrence earned a lot of honor in the war with Mexico and in repelling various Pirate attacks on Texas zeppelins in the following years, soon gaining command over his own squadron, the Brazos Rangers. All looked very promising for the coyote.

Until the year 1936. Early in April of that year one of Law's enemies who envied him of his success found out that he was a hybrid. His mother, who died when Law was 7, was a wolf and with the Texaninan government being a purist government Lawrence was immediately dishonorably discharged. Enraged by the actions of the country he loved so much Law summoned the members of his squadron, who were all loyal to him and on the night spanning the 15th and 16th of April, they broke into their squadron's hanger, stole all the planes, a transporter, and most of the supplies of the base. They disappeared for a few weeks and while the Texas Rangers did everything to find them the Brazos Rangers seemed to have vanished. Then they came back, raided the military airport near Houston and stole the war-zeppelin *Corral*. From that point on the Brazos Rangers were officially declared pirates. The press renamed then the Brazos Marauders and Law happily adopted that name.

Now they had been pirates for over 3 years and still Lawrence could not get enough of the indescribable fuzzy feeling he got in his tummy when he entered the hangar shortly before they started a raid.

By now the coyote had made his way to the back of the large room where the squadron's largest fighter was positioned, a Hughes Firebrand. His brown eyes narrowed as they fixated on the orange tabby feline who stood on the right wing of the bomber and yelled things at the crew who loaded the missiles under the plane. The cat grinned as he noticed Lawrence.

“Hey Boss!” he shouted and jumped down from the plane. Just like every time he did that Law expected that the tabby would break at least one of his legs but his friend always landed with feline agility.

“I hate it when you do that,” Law said, casting the cat an evil look.

“I know,” David “Dynamite” Celis replied with a large grin.

David Celis came from Central America. He had spent most of his young life fighting guerilla wars against the region’s various dictators until one day he was sick of it. He snuck into an air field, stole an old Focke-Wulf transporter and made his way over the Gulf of Mexico towards the former United States of America. Fully expecting that he wouldn’t make it, David surprised himself by crossing the sea and reaching Texas, where he was intercepted by Law’s squadron a year before the coyote’s discharge. Law was quite impressed by the feline’s obvious piloting talent and upon David’s agreement to join the Brazos Rangers the tabby was punched through a brutal training class that left him as one of the squadron’s best pilots. Over the years he and Law had become great friends and the cat’s experience with guerilla tactics had proven incredibly valuable after they had become pirates.

“What’s up, Boss?” David asked.

“Briefing is up, Dave,” Law replied. “Leave the guys alone so they can do their job, and come to the briefing room.”

“Sorry, Boss. I just can’t help myself.”

“No worries, gato,” the coyote replied with a smile and slapped David on the shoulder. “I know how attached to that plane you are. But now come on. There’s a lot of money waiting for us.”

###

Only a few hundred miles away there was another fur who loved flying just as much as Lawrence did and he felt feelings quite similar to what the coyote felt, but for a completely different reason. His fuzzy feelings derived from the soft paw that slowly caressed his body underneath the silken bed sheets. His own strong arms were wrapped around the auburn furred body of his lover as he licked her face. Yes, Tygon was feeling quite fuzzy right now. He had waited for this opportunity to be alone with his fiancé for days and he wasn’t going to waste it. Victoria was squealing in delight at the attention he paid to her facial fur and Tygon wasn’t going to let her stop.

Many had thought a marriage between so different furs would never be possible, an opinion that was mostly based on the fact that Victoria was a petite, if athletic Maine Coon Cat and Tygon a large tiger-lion hybrid. Neither of the two did care about this though. The moment Tygon had laid his eyes on Victoria that night at the Spring Ball two

years ago he knew that she was the one he wanted. The blue eyed feline had similar feelings and fortunately both their parents agreed to their desire to marry, even if it was mostly because both families would profit from the wealth of the other.

So Victoria and Tygon were officially engaged and a date for the wedding was set. Much to their mutual dismay, their respective parents, conservative as they still were, insisted that they would have no sort of intimate contact with each other until they were married. Neither Victoria nor Tygon thought very much of that idea and acted defiant to it whenever there was a possibility to do so. Unfortunately there weren't many possibilities to do so but Tygon's missions were perfect for that.

And so there were the two lovers, about to prove to each other how much they meant to each other. It was really no surprise that Tygon was experiencing fuzzy feelings. And it was also no surprise that he was incredibly pissed when somebody knocked at the door.

"What?" he grumbled angrily.

"Sir?" a muffled voice Tygon recognized at the one of George Coleman, his adjutant. "I think we have a problem."

"Get lost, George and come back when you're sure!" Tygon shouted and was about to turn back to his lover when his adjutant spoke again.

"S-sir, please," the raccoon stuttered on the other side of the door. "The scouts, they spotted unidentified planes 80 kilometers on south-south-west. They think they might be pirates."

Tygon gave a sigh of resignation. "Okay, George. Tell them I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Y-yes sir." A shuffle of feet sounded from the other side of the door and then silence.

Tygon turned back to his would-be significant other. "I'm sorry, my dear, but I have to take a look at this." The large feline smiled as he saw Victoria's pouting expression. "Don't worry. I doubt it will take long. They most likely spotted a few kits who took a flight in daddy's autogyro."

"Hurry," the cat replied and planted a kiss on Tygon's cheek.

Smiling Tygon got up and started stretching. He took his time with that, not so much to make sure that all of his muscles were working properly but more so his fiancée could see every part of his well defined and trained body. The tan fur that covered him faded towards creamy beige and then to pure white on his front. His red mane, normally carefully styled, was in a rather rough state that gave it a fiery look. Black stripes decorated his body from his head to his black-tufted tail.

Eventually Tygon dressed himself, all the while with Victoria watching him hungrily. As he was ready to leave and reached for the door he felt something touch his back. As he turned around his eyes grew wide and he stumbled backwards until he was leaning to the door. The female feline pressed her nude body to Tygon's clothed one and, while she put one of her paws behind the larger cat's head to pull him down into a long, passionate kiss, her right paw grabbed his left and moved it between their bodies until his finger touched the underside of her right breast. But just as he wanted to explore that particular part of her body further Victoria pulled his paw away.

"You'll get the complete set when you come back," she whispered into his ear in her best, most sultry voice. Then she spun around and swished her tail over Tygon's face, blinding him momentarily so he wasn't able to catch any details of her body before she dived back under the sheets. "Hurry," she said with a wink as she blew him a kiss.

"I will," Tygon replied breathlessly and quickly left the room. Outside he leaned against the wall for a while to allow his body and mind to calm down.

"Oh yes," he said to himself. "I will hurry. But first..." The feline tugged and pulled at his pants for a moment. "Ah, better."

With a very happy smile he started walking down the hallway towards the bridge.

###

In the briefing room of most of the planets' armies, things would have been very ordered and civilized. There would be some light chatting or other activities going on to allow the pilots to relax a bit before they would start into a mission that probably could mean the death of many of them. Then, when the captain entered, they would quickly grow silent and pay attention to what the officer had to say, because it was not only critical for the success of the mission, it could mean the difference between life and death for them.

Pirates, however, preferred a more relaxed atmosphere. Loud and animated conversations were going on and they did not stop as Law and Dave entered.

"Gang?" Lawrence tried to get their attention but it was of no use. "Gang!" the coyote tried again, but to no avail. He turned to David who grinned wide. "Would you please?"

"Sure thing, Boss."

The sound of a match lighting and then a funny sizzling sound filled the room. Everyfur went silent and stared at David, who was holding a stick of dynamite in his left paw. An unlit cigarette was between his widely grinning lips as the fuse slowly burned away. A few seconds later he used it to light his cigarette and then snuffed the fuse out with his fingers.

“Well, thank you all for attending this briefing,” Law began after everyone had settled down. He always began his briefings with that sentence.

“As you all know, our target is the *Imperial Star*, one of the Empire State’s biggest long-range transport zeppelins.” The coyote went on. “As such, it is not only laden with riches, it is also very well protected. In fact this, gentlemen, is an aerial equivalent to the Spanish gold fleets from the 18th century.”

“Normally we would stay as far away from such a thing as possible.” Lawrence pointed to a big picture of a huge zeppelin that hung behind him. “As you can see, this behemoth not only has more transporting capacity than everything else in the air, it also has a fighter hangar, meaning that it can support a full squadron of defending aircraft. In addition it has an impressive array of gun turrets.”

“Captain?”

“Yes, Andy?”

“Captain,” Andrew Firecloud, a Sioux who had joined the Brazos Marauders two years ago, spoke up. “If this is so clearly a suicide mission, then why are we doing it?”

“I’ll tell you, Andy,” Lawrence replied. “I have a trustworthy inside contact who has kindly supplied me not only with the routes of their scouts, but also with the flight plan of the Battery Battlers, who are defending the *Imperial Star*. We’ll attack during the shift change of their patrolling aircrafts. There is a window of a few minutes when they’ll be most defenseless. We have to use these minutes to attack, disable their defenses and then take over the zep. We’ll bring her and the *Corral* alongside and get all the cargo over here we can stuff in. Then we’ll make the *Star* immobile, as well as all the aircraft onboard and leave her behind. If everything goes well we’ll be far away before any help for them will arrive.”

“Why don’t we kidnap the *Star*? It would make a really nice flagship.” It was Karin Porter, one of only three female pilots in the squadron who asked that question.

“Because it’s a lumbering giant. True, for a transporter it has an impressive firepower and we would be able to carry more cargo than most pirates will ever capture, but every other squadron could easily outrun and outmaneuver us. No, the *Star* is no ship for us. We’ll be doing fine with getting as much out of her as we can and then getting the hell away.”

“Then why don’t we blow the *Star* out of the sky?” David intervened. “That would be a nice slap in the face for the Empire State.”

“True,” Chris “Slide” Brewer, a gray wolf who had spent a good part of his life in New York, replied to Dave’s suggestion. “But as I see it, the *Imperial Star* is one of the

Empire State's most famous and important airships and if we destroy it they won't rest until our tails are hanging on their walls."

"Exactly, Chris," Lawrence said. "Okay, this is the plan. We'll approach the *Star* at low altitude so we can get as close as possible without them spotting us. Once we're within 3 kilometers of the target we spread into three wings. Alpha Wing will be centered around Karin, since she's our local sharpshooter. We'll defend her while she fires some smoke missiles and perhaps a flashbang into the hangar. That should keep them from launching any other fighters without killing too many furs. After that is done Alpha will take care of the fighters that are already in the air and any other opposition that may interfere. Beta Wing will protect Dave while he takes out as many of the *Star*'s turrets as possible." Lawrence turned to the tabby. "Keep that in mind, Dave. Just the turrets! Leave the zeppelin in one piece."

"Geez, you blow up one tiny zeppelin and nobody trusts you anymore!" the orange cat exclaimed with a wide grin.

"Just keep it in mind," Lawrence said, winking to Dave. "Anyway, once the defenses are sufficiently decimated, Gamma Wing will join. They will protect the boarding party in our troop transporter. They'll hook up to the *Star* and take it over. Once that is done they'll signal the *Corral* and fly the *Star* to the rendezvous point. Once we've got all the cargo we can hold we'll immobilize the *Star* and leave for our hideout. If everything goes right we'll all be very rich furs."

Law's grin grew wide during his last sentence and all the furs in the room cheered loudly.

"Alright, ladies, let's fly!"

###

Tygon Panthera was a proud fur from a proud family. Made of very successful business furs on both his father's and his mother's sides, they were one of the richest families in New York City. His parents' marriage had been little more than an arranged marriage, but his parents had learned to love each other, thus uniting the Panthera's and the Löwenstein's companies into a thriving business empire. While a lot of governments were strictly against interspecies marriage, in the Empire State, where money rules, everything happened according to the motto "Who cares as long as it's good for business;" and good for business the marriage was.

The unavoidable result of the marriage was Tygon. Upon the moment of his birth he was the pride and joy of his parents. The hybrid grew up into a strong, handsome, young big cat with excellent grades and a natural feeling for the stock market. However, in at least one way Tygon was like all the other young boys of his age. He wanted to be a fighter pilot. The danger, the honor and the excitement attracted the fur very strongly, but since Tygon came from a rich family he could usually get what he wanted easily.

Charles-Franklin Panthera used his influence and money to get his son into pilot training and later assigned to the Broadway Bombers, the best pilots of the Empire State.

This assignment, however, wasn't entirely due to the Panthera's money. Tygon proved himself to be a fair rank above the average pilot, and during his first mission he earned his rightly place among the Bombers. The hybrid displayed a wild and ruthless flying style, and in combination with his tendency to play with his enemies before shooting them down, this earned him the callsign "Wildcat".

Charles-Franklin Panthera realized how much good his son's success and fame in the Broadway Bombers brought for the company and pushed his son to more achievements. Therefore, it was not a surprise to most furs that after only two years Tygon got command over his own squadron, which he christened the Battery Battlers, honoring the southern part of Manhattan where he was born, grew up and lived.

Oh yes, Tygon was a proud fur. He was proud of his family, he was proud of his heritage, he was proud of being a hybrid, he was proud of his abilities, as a pilot as well as a leader and business fur, and he showed his pride. His body was well trained and his fur always carefully groomed. His uniform and pilot's gear were always clean and tidy. Even the way he moved showed his pride. Upright and with head raised high, he entered the bridge of the *Imperial Star*. His firm steps brought him quickly to the impressive communications center of the bridge. Five furs were sitting there, using various radios and other communications equipment to monitor the skies and keep contact with the scout and patrol crafts. Tygon's adjutant was also there.

"What's up, George?" Tygon said once he had reached the raccoon. "I hope it is important."

"Believe me, Sir, it is," George replied. He pointed to a mark on the large map that was spread before him on a table. "About three minutes ago the scouts spotted unidentified aircrafts at this position. As they went to investigate the planes turned and disappeared."

"They disappeared?"

"Yes, Sir. They flew up into the clouds and vanished. The scouts weren't able to follow them."

"Hmmm..." Tygon mumbled, scratching his chin as he always did when he was thinking. That wasn't good. It was unlikely that it was Appalachian militia, since this transport was authorized by the Appalachian government. Their pilots would have identified themselves and not scrambled. That left only one logical answer: Pirates. "I take it they weren't autogyros."

It was more a statement than a question, but George answered anyway. "No, Sir, definitely not. They were far too fast and maneuverable for that."

“I see,” Tygon replied, a bit annoyed by the problem. “We’ll double the scouts and tell them to keep their eyes wide open. If pirates want to attack us I want to know before it happens.”

“Of course, Sir. The scouts are just doing a shift change. I’ll forward your orders to them. I promise you, nothing will get within twenty-five Kilometers’ range without us noticing.”

As if to underlie the raccoon’s words a sudden explosion shook the zeppelin, making a few of the furs in the bridge shout out, startled.

“What was that?” George asked in shock, holding onto the table so he wouldn’t fall to the floor.

Tygon was already on his way out of the bridge as he shouted his reply. “That was a high explosive rocket, you idiot!”

###

“WOO-HOO!!!”

The shout came loudly over the radio. If Lawrence hadn’t been so used to David’s behavior he would have jumped in his suit. The tabby loved explosions and when Chris’ rocket hit the Battler’s Raven it was clear that nothing would hold the feline back anymore.

“Keep it down, Dynamite,” Law advised Dave over the radio. “Everyfur else, keep in formation. We’ll proceed as planned.”

“Sniper,” The coyote addressed Karin by her callsign. “Get ready to deliver our package.”

“Sure thing, Junior,” the red panda femme replied. Law could see her steering her Curtiss-Wright J2 Fury to take the zeppelin’s fighter hangar under target.

So far everything was going fine. The few patrol craft that were in the air were surprised and wouldn’t be able to put up a decent defense for a few more minutes. If Sniper could disable the hangar everything would be almost done.

“Fire, Quickdraw, take care of these two Avengers over there.”

The two pilots followed their captain’s orders and left the formation to fend off the two attacking fighters. Only a few more seconds. He was waiting for the right moment, the right distance.

“NOW!” he shouted and suddenly all the fighters spread out, hopefully diverting the defender’s fire from Sniper. The femme in the gray Fury was the only one who kept flying in a straight line and half a second later the white smoke trail of a rocket was pointing from the machine’s left wing to the hangar. A moment later another one followed from the right wing. Then Sniper dived down and disappeared under the hangar. Lawrence had to make a few evasive maneuvers himself to avoid turret fire, but from the corner of his eye he could see how the smoke was pouring out of the hangar. A smile found its way on his muzzle. That vanished a second later though.

“This is Sniper, there are two Ravens on my tail and I can’t shake them. I need help.”

“I’ll be there in a second, Sniper,” Law replied and turned his Devastator around. For such a big craft the fighter was rather agile and the maneuver was no problem, but he got the shock of his life as he flew under the *Imperial Star* and a small fighter suddenly dropped out of the hangar. The machine, identified by the coyote as a Hughes Bloodhawk, a small but extremely fast and agile fighter, was taking up speed unbelievably fast and Lawrence expected it to crash into the ground; but the pilot managed to pull the plane upwards and bring it high into the sky in a wide bow.

“Damn, that pilot either has more luck than an entire field of clovers or he is really damn good,” the coyote mumbled to himself before he turned back to help Sniper.

###

As Tygon entered the hangar the activity in the large room bordered on panic. It was shift change, and everyfur was prepared for the rather stressful work of getting the planes onboard. The sudden attack caught everyfur by surprise. Tygon wondered how the pirates could have known that they would do the shift change right here and right now. This was the time they were most vulnerable and so the timetable was a very strictly kept secret. There must be a spy somewhere in his team. The large feline was certain of this, and vowed he would find the one and make sure he got what he deserved. But one thing at a time. First he had to blast these bastards out of the sky.

Tygon looked around in search for his personal mechanic but the canine was nowhere to find.

“Dammit, where is Pflarrian?” the large feline muttered. A moment later he had spotted Andrews, the hangarmaster. The black wolf was shouting orders to workers who dashed away a second later.

“I want the fighters in the air five minutes ago!” Tygon shouted over the noise.

“We’re on it, Captain,” Andrews replied. “By the time the pilots are here they’ll be ready.”

“Alright. I need someone to throw me out!”

“Charlie!” the wolf yelled and a rather small vixen wearing an oil stained coverall joined them a moment later.

“Yes Boss?”

“The Captain needs to be thrown out!”

Charlie just gave Andrews a thumbs-up, and then ran with Tygon to the aft of the hangar where the striped lion’s personal fighter was positioned. The Hughes Bloodhawk was hanging from the docking cables over large doors that could be opened quickly by explosive bolts, making the fighter permanently ready for launch. Tygon quickly climbed up the ladder and settled down into the cockpit. He strapped on the flight harness and turned on the motor. Quickly he checked the weapons, the fuel and the radio. As everything was indicating normal functionality he closed the cockpit. That was the sign for Charlie to open the doors and release the plane. The part with the doors worked fine. The explosive bolts blew the locks away and then swung open downwards. It was with the releasing of the fighter that the problems began.

There was a loud bang and suddenly the activity in the room rose to definite panic levels. Then dense, black smoke filled the front part of the hangar. Then, with another bang, something smashed through one of the side windows and more smoke spread into the room. Smoke rockets, Tygon realized. The pirates must have an extraordinary good gunner among their ranks if he could fire smoke rockets into the windows.

Then Tygon realized that something was wrong. He was still hanging around here. A look to his right told him why. Charlie had dropped down to the floor as the rockets hit and was just in the process of getting up again. As she realized what had happened she ran back to the center of the hangar to help her co-workers, leaving Tygon helpless in his plane. The feline shouted after her but through the cockpit and the noise she never heard him.

“Damn!” he cursed. It was only a single lever that had to be pulled and he would be free, but he needed someone to do it for him. The problem was that there was nobody available and the way it looked there wouldn’t be anybody available in the close future either. A clever plan, that much Tygon had to admit. With the chaos in the hangar they wouldn’t be able to launch any planes soon and the scouts had no chance against the pirates.

Tygon was about to open his harness to get out of the Bloodhawk and do something constructive when he remembered something. His paw glided down until it rested on his pistol. Quickly the big cat pulled the cockpit open and aimed the weapon at the lever. With a little luck Charlie had already opened the lock and then...

**BANG!**

The pistol rocked in Tygon's paw as he fired. A shower of sparks erupted from the lever as it was hit by the bullet and thrown into the 'open' position. A split second later Tygon felt the familiar feeling of nausea as the fighter dropped out of the hanger. Within half a second he had pushed the pistol back into the holster and pulled the cockpit closed. His left paw grabbed the controls as his right pushed the speed control as far forward as possible.

The downside of the Bloodhawk's pusher propeller and rear-wing design, which gave her the exceptional speed and superb maneuverability, was that the plane had an unusually high stall speed. Tygon's problem now was to reach that speed before he crashed into the forest beneath him. Normally that was not a problem but during the rather unique circumstances of his launch he had lost a good second and some preparation time too. His only hope now was to lower the nose of the Bloodhawk and pray that the pull of gravity and the power of the engine were enough to keep the plane aloft.

The needle of the speedometer was moving very fast but so far the only reaction Tygon noticed was that the ground came nearer much faster than it had before. His paws grabbed the controls tightly and pulled them backwards. Slowly, very slowly, the scene before him began to tilt forward. Where before he had been in free fall, Tygon now felt the pull of gravity, enhanced by the centrifugal forces the angle of the plane now created.

*Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn...* Tygon cursed in his thoughts as he pulled the controls back with all his might. The forest came nearer, seemingly unstoppable, and Tygon was sure that he wouldn't make it. Then it was as if he hit something solid. The Bloodhawk rocked into an almost straight position, only a few meters over the trees. Tygon had no idea what had happened, but he wasn't going to complain about it. Almost touching the trees the Bloodhawk made a wide bow as it rose back into the sky.

As the sun came into Tygon's sight, forcing him to close his eyes for a second, he realized what had happened. He must have hit a stream of warm air that rose above the forest. Thankful for the lucky coincidence, he steered the plane back to face the battle.

The first look told him that things weren't going well. The pirates had superior numbers and firepower and the only thing coming out of the hangar was black smoke.

With a quick moment of his paw he tuned into the frequency of the *Imperial Star*.

*"Imperial Star, this is Captain Panthera, do you read me?"*

*"Captain Panthera, this is the Imperial Star, we read you,"* came the reply a moment later.

*"Get somebody into the hangar and make sure they use the ventilation system to get the smoke out of there. I want the entire squadron in the air and I want it there NOW!"*

“Yes, Sir. Anything else?”

“Situation report.”

“We can hold them off so far but there is a Firebrand out there that keeps blowing up our turrets.”

“All right, I will take care of that. Over.”

Tygon turned his attention back to the battle. It took him only a second to spot the Firebrand. The huge ‘flying wing’ aircraft was hard to miss. He wondered how the pirates had gotten ahold of such a powerful machine, but that was something he could think about later. His priority now was to take it out of their ranks. With a smile of anticipation for the upcoming fight, he pushed the controls forward and the Bloodhawk dove down towards the Firebrand.

###

David loved explosions. He would never admit it, but that was the true reason why he had joined the rebels in Central America all those years ago. He just loved to blow up stuff. So it was no surprise that he was in seventh heaven as he blasted away one turret after another. The large Firebrand was certainly not as maneuverable as other machines but it could carry more weapons than most. Only the Balmoral was better armed. The size and powerful motors of the plane meant that it also was much better armored than most aircraft. That made up for its lack of agility since the Firebrand could stand quite a punch. And a punching it received, for the furs in the turrets obviously had other plans that didn’t involve being blown up. Dave had no problem with that. He didn’t really like the thought of killing those brave males and females either but it happened. In the end it was the better or the luckier one who survived. That applied to the jungles of Central America as well as to the skies of North America.

The tabby had just taken aim to fire a torpedo at another turret as someone addressed him via the radio.

“Dynamite! There is a Bloodhawk on your tail!”

He looked up just in time to see the small plane shoot by. *What the heck?* Dave thought. The pilot of the Bloodhawk hadn’t shot at him. Why? The smaller plane’s weapons weren’t very powerful but they *were* deadly precise. This didn’t make sense.

###

Lawrence had watched how the Bloodhawk had passed Dave’s Firebrand without shooting. That alone was suspicious enough, but the coyote thought he had noticed a small, white line that connected the two planes for a second and that unsettled him even more.

“Dynamite, hold still for a second,” he advised the tabby via radio as he brought his Devastator as close to the Firebrand as possible. Then he found his fears confirmed. There was a very faint, very high sound and it came from Dave’s fighter.

“He marked you, Dynamite! Evasive maneuver! Everybody, watch out for that Bloodhawk. He has seekers!”

Dave immediately let the Firebrand dive down to a low altitude. Seekers were a very feared, if rare weapon. Actually they consisted of a set of two rockets, the beeper and the seeker. The beeper was a small projectile that, instead of detonating, clutched to the target and then emitted an ultra-sonic signal. The seekers were essentially miniature planes equipped with a rocket engine. They followed the signal of the beeper to the target, where they detonated. Some extreme maneuvers would shake off a seeker but the Firebrand was far too heavy for that. Dave’s only hope was to go as deep as possible and hope that the seeker would crash into the ground.

Law steered his plane around, in the direction of the Bloodhawk. The small plane had flown a wide bow in the meantime and was again going for the Firebrand.

“Don’t worry, Dynamite, I’ll get him!” That was Firecloud, who dove down on the Bloodhawk from above, sending a hail of bullets towards the small fighter. The Bloodhawk pilot had to pull his machine away to avoid the high-speed lead but he fired a rocket anyway. The tiny plane was shooting towards Dave, making only a few corrections and Law was sure that it would hit but at the last possible moment Dave pulled the Firebrand upwards and the seeker missed him by only a few centimeters. It crashed into the forests, the explosion setting a few trees on fire but otherwise doing no damage.

With a sigh of relief Lawrence pulled his Devastator upwards to follow the Bloodhawk, which had shot almost straight up into the sky. When he finally pulled close enough for his guns to have some effect he fired the large-caliber weapons he’d had the mechanics install into the Devastator. He didn’t hit though. The Bloodhawk suddenly slowed down and for a moment it seemed to stand still in the sky. Then it tilted to the side and fell. During the fall the pilot put the engine back to full power and the fighter shot down, its guns spitting death at Firecloud’s Coyote. The maneuver was too extreme for Law’s Devastator so he could only watch as the Bloodhawk followed Firecloud mercilessly to take revenge for the cougar’s earlier attack.

“This guy is slicing me into pieces, somefur help me!” Firecloud’s voice was a panicked plea as it came over the radio. His Coyote was a formidable aircraft but it had no chance of shaking off the Bloodhawk. A few moments later the Coyote’s right wing was torn off by the Bloodhawk’s fire. Law held his breath until he saw a parachute begin to open a second later. Firecloud would live.

“I’m going to get that bastard,” Lawrence promised himself as he again maneuvered

his fighter to follow the Bloodhawk.

###

With great satisfaction Tygon watched the Coyote crash into the forest. *Now back to the Firebrand.* He steered the Bloodhawk around but what he faced was not the bomber but a gray-black Devastator with blazing guns. The hybrid pushed the controls forward and dove under the larger fighter to escape the destruction it was sending towards him. Only a second after his dive Tygon pulled the controls back to his body and the Bloodhawk rose back into the sky in a wide arc. He kept his grip around the controls until the plane was horizontal again, but upside down. Using his aircraft's superior speed the feline caught up with the Devastator until he was flying directly above it. Looking up, or rather downwards, Tygon could see the gray-black machine and the insignias on its wings, a river with two crossed colts over it. The hybrid recognized the sign. He was fighting the Brazos Marauders and since the callsign "Junior" was also written on the wing Tygon knew that the fur under him was their commander. Lawrence Burne looked up in his cockpit and for a moment that seemed like eternity the two furs glared at each other.

Then Tygon pulled the controls around, making the Bloodhawk shoot to the right. Law did the same with the Devastator, just in the other direction. Both machines flew a wide curve until they again faced each other, their guns spitting death and destruction at each other.

###

While all this was happening a small transporter approached the *Imperial Star* from behind. It was slow and sluggish but small enough to not be noticed easily, and more importantly it was full of heavily armed pirates. It was coming in low at a slow speed, and while everyfur was busy fighting or watching the fight it docked to the *Star* at an emergency docking point. Grapnels pulled the plane closer to the zeppelin until the hatches touched each other. Both of the heavy doors opened and a ladder was extended into the transporter. One after another the pirates climbed out.

"Hurry," a shadowed figure said in a low voice. A white furred paw pointed towards a door. "That way. Be quick. They are all confused and scared. You must finish the job before they can collect themselves."

Nodding grimly the leader of the troop ran to the door and opened it. After he confirmed that everything was clear on the other side he signaled his fellow pirates to follow him, leaving the shadowed figure behind.

###

For a minute or so Tygon and Lawrence were entangled in a fierce dogfight. It was an even fight since both pilot's abilities were comparably good. Tygon's Bloodhawk was

too fast and maneuverable for Law to land any substantial hits. Meanwhile, the coyote's Devastator was quick enough to escape most of Tygon's attacks and was too heavily armored for the Bloodhawk's relatively weak guns to punch through on the occasions when it did hit.

Eventually however Law managed to take aim on the Bloodhawk. But instead of firing the guns he shot one of his high explosive rockets at the smaller plane. Tygon saw the deadly weapon coming and pulled the Bloodhawk upwards, escaping it easily. However, as his plane was rising into the sky almost vertically he suddenly heard a loud bang and then his engine died.

*VACUUM ROCKET!!* A horror-filled thought shot through his head. The specialized weapon created a very large and widespread explosion. While the explosion itself was relatively harmless for modern airplanes, the real danger was what followed for the fire ate all the oxygen around the explosion away. Of course, without oxygen the engines of any airplane too close to the explosion died instantly.

A lump of panic rose in Tygon's throat as the Bloodhawk slowed down and then fell like a stone. The striped lion hammered his thumb on the ignition button, but the engine just coughed and gurgled.

"Damn, damn, damn, *damn...*"

###

Lawrence watched the Bloodhawk falling downwards for a moment, then turned his own plane around. The pilot had been good but now he was done for.

"Thanks, Slide," he said over the radio.

"No prob, Junior," the canine who had fired the vacuum rocket replied.

Law directed his Devastator back to the Star, planning to help his fellow pilots but his eyes widened in shock as he saw plane after plane dropping out of the zeppelin's hangar.

"Oh shit!" he shouted. That was not good. His plans were based on the idea that they could keep the Battery Battlers from taking off in the first place.

"Brazos Marauders, this is Junior. The Battlers are taking off. Everyfur get ready for a hard battle and prepare for an emergency retreat."

New streams of sweat were flowing down his forehead, making his eyes burn. The Battery Battlers had more planes and also more firepower than he could ever field. The tables were turning against him and his friends and that was something he did not like at all.

###

Tygon in the meantime wasn't feeling much better, even if he was primarily afraid for his own life. His thumb pressed the ignition again and again but not much happened. Panic took over in his mind. His Bloodhawk needed speed to fly and at this rate the engine would not be able to create enough speed before the plane crashed into the ground. The large feline squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to see the trees under him come closer. "Damn, damn, DAMN!!!" he shouted and hit the ignition with his fist.

Suddenly he was pressed into his seat as the engine came to life. Instinctively he pulled the controls to himself. His eyes still closed, Tygon could feel the change in pressure as the Bloodhawk flew a sharp arc. At one point there was an odd rumble and the plane rocked, making Tygon think it had hit the ground, but then it grew steady again. As he finally opened his eyes Tygon saw the blue sky in front of him.

"WOOO-HOOOO!!!" he shouted, very happy that he was still alive.

The Bloodhawk made a very wide loop, giving Tygon some time to calm down and mentally thank Pflarrian for the modification he had done to the plane's engine to allow a faster restart. At times the canine's tendency to change and modify everything he could get his paws on was a little unnerving, but not for the first time it had saved Tygon's life.

###

That particular canine was hurrying through the hallways of the *Imperial Star* right at that moment, trying to get to the bridge as quickly as possible. Pflarrian Collifox was not only head mechanic of the Battery Battlers and responsible for Captain Panthera's personal Bloodhawk, he was also a good friend of Tygon and so he was worried about the feline. He had helped the crew to get the smoke out of the hangar, using the *Star's* extensive ventilation system. However, that still meant that Tygon had been virtually alone with the Marauders out there for over four minutes. While Pflarrian knew that Tygon could survive even at worse odds than those, he just had to be sure.

The zeppelin's bridge already was a chaotic place in normal situations but now as the *Star* was under attack it was almost unbearable. The canine made his way through the crowd to the radios.

"Do you have a line to Captain Panthera?" he asked one of furs who manned the radios.

"Yes, Sir," the otter replied.

"Good, I need to talk to him." Pflarrian snatched the microphone away from him, not paying attention to the otter's protests. "Tygon, this is Pflarrian. Hello Tygon, do you read me?"

After a moment of static the feline's voice came from the speakers. "Pflarr! Remind me to buy you a drink once we're back home."

The collie-fox hybrid grinned, knowing that one of the many modifications he had done on Tygon's plane had worked. "Are you alright, Ty?" he asked.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," Tygon replied. "A bit stressed maybe, but I'll survive. ACK!!!"

"What's going on?" Pflarrian asked, his worries coming back during the seconds of silence that followed Tygon's sudden shout.

"I'm alright," the reply eventually came from the speakers, making the collifox release the breath he hadn't even realized he was holding. At times it was just too stressful to see your best friend go and face death in a plane again and again. "One of those pirate bastards almost got me," Tygon went on. "Had to make a nosedive down to lose him. I'm passing underneath the *Star* now... WHAT THE HECK?!?!"

"What is it?"

"There is a small transporter hanging at the emergency hatch. Do we have anybody there?"

"No, definitely not," the otter who was still sitting on his place said. "Nobody aside from the Battlers docked or otherwise came onboard since we left the Empire State and even then, they would not have used the Emergency hatch."

It didn't take much to add up two and two from there. "We're being boarded!" Pflarrian shouted. "Captain! We're being boarded!"

"We're being what?!?" Captain Edwards, an elderly fox, shouted and hurried across the bridge towards Pflarrian.

"Boarded," the canine replied. "Captain Panthera spotted a transporter that has docked to the emergency hatch."

"That's impossible. Nobody can get in from there without someone inside. They couldn't even dock. The hooks have to be extended."

"Then there must be someone on the *Star* who is helping them. In any case, we need to prepare."

Captain Edwards nodded. "I'll alert the troops and organize a counterattack."

Without another word Pflarrian turned back to the radio. "Tygon, you there?"

“Yep. Being shot at but alive.”

“We’re setting up a counter attack,” Pflarrian went on. “Thanks for the warning.”

There was a short pause before Tygon spoke again. “No problem. I’ll have one of my pilots shoot down that transporter so they can’t escape on it.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t,” Pflarrian replied quickly. “Maybe we can find useful information. Maps with locations of pirate nests and such.”

“Good thinking! Okay, no shooting the transporter.”

“Alright, Tygon. I’ll go now and ready the... special equipment.”

The feline’s laughter sounded almost scary over the radio. “I’m almost sorry for the pirates. Give them hell, buddy.”

“Sir, yes, Sir!” Pflarrian replied, grinning wide. “Pflarrian Collifox out.”

###

The pirates moved as silently as possible through the zeppelin. They kept quiet so they would not alert anyone of their presence before they were ready. The pirate’s contact on the *Imperial Star* had supplied them with detailed maps of the huge zeppelin and thus it was easy for them to find their way towards the bridge.

“Something is wrong,” one of the pirates said in a nervous tone of voice.

“Silence!” Jonathan Long, a muscular wolf and the fur in command, hissed.

“Exactly,” the one who had spoken up replied. “It is too quiet.”

The man had a point. It was much too silent on the *Star*. With the pirates attacking he had expected the zeppelin to be full of panicking passengers. However, so far their contact had been the only other fur they had met.

“We will proceed as planned,” Jonathan whispered to his troops, “but keep quiet and watch out for anything suspicious.”

The pirates replied with grim nods. Satisfied the commander turned around and slowly made his way along the hallway. He was about to peer around a corner when a loud voice echoed through the hallway.

“Stop right there!”

The wolf spun around, just like the rest of the group, but the hallway was empty. He

was about to send some of his troops down the hallway when suddenly a loud bang made his ears fold back and smoke began to fill the hallway.

“We’ve been spotted!” he shouted. “Fall back!”

With their weapons aimed towards the spreading cloud of black smoke the pirates retreated back around the last corner. Since Jonathan was in the back now he was one of the furs who turned to make sure the way behind them was clear and just like the others the wolf froze at the sight before him.

In the hallway, blocking it completely stood three furs side by side. The wolf at least assumed that they were furs, for they all were clad in dark metal. He had never seen something like that before. He knew that soldiers sometimes had metal plates worked into their armor to provide protection against bullets but something like what he saw here onboard the *Imperial Star* was totally new to him. All the three furs were enclosed completely by metal. Jonathan could see joints at their arms and legs allowing them to move and slits in the helmets through which these soldiers doubtless glared at their enemies. A second line of three more armored furs stood behind them

“Not a single movement,” a voice said from behind the armored furs, who had raised heavy rifles towards the pirates. The wolf’s thoughts raced. Their surprise attack wasn’t a surprise anymore, that much was clear. All that was left to him now was getting the furs under his command out of here alive. The question was how?

“Give up now and we will let you live,” the voice spoke up again. That was an option. However, it was not one the wolf liked. Again Jonathan looked over the iron-clad furs. They were well protected, but he doubted that they could move very fast in that armor. Ergo, they most likely were not able to follow the pirates. If the crew of the *Star* knew that they were onboard they might have blocked their way back too, but the wolf was willing to take that risk.

“On my sign we fall back and then retreat to the transporter,” the commander whispered to the closest of his small troop. The fur, a lean ferret, replied with a light nod. Then Jonathan made a slow step forward his arms raised high in the air. “Alright, alright,” he said. “You win.”

The wolf didn’t wait for a reply. Instead he pulled the trigger of his shotgun and fired a shot at the lamp directly above him. The milky-white panel and the light bulbs behind it exploded in a shower of sparks, causing the armored furs to shout in surprise. Jonathan spun around, realizing with satisfaction that the furs under his command were already running back the way they had come. He heard gunfire from their enemies but by then he was already around the corner and out of range.

###

“I guess they won’t be caught that easily after all.”

“I didn’t think they would,” Pflarrian said to his assistant. “Don’t worry I’ve prepared some nice surprises for them.”

As his armored troops started marching after the pirates, Pflarrian and his assistant, a rather small but very smart Fennec named Maximilian Jones, followed them. Max was pushing a large cart with all sorts of equipment while Pflarrian watched the *Imperial Star*’s defenders. The collifox had conceived the full body armor months before and had already done extensive testing, but this was the first actual combat the suits had seen and Pflarrian was very curious to see how they would perform.

###

Following his troop of would-be zeppelin raiders, Jonathan raced through the hallways of the *Imperial Star* on their way back to the transporter. The wolf sent a quick prayer to whatever gods might be listening that the crew of the zeppelin hadn’t somehow managed to block their way as he ran. However, it seemed that the gods were not on the pirates’ side, for as Jonathan dashed around another corner he had to face the sight of his troop coming to a halt as they found the way blocked by more furs in full-body armor.

“One move and we’ll blast you all right to hell!” one of the furs shouted as they all raised their weapons. Jonathan was about to shout orders to keep the furs under his command calm but one of them lost his nerves and fired at the metal-clad defenders. The shot hit the defender’s armor and ricocheted off harmlessly. However, it seemed like the loud bang was some sort of mutual sign for suddenly both sides of the conflict started shooting. The wolf cursed and started firing himself while he tried to guide his troop back, away from the defenders.

It quickly became obvious that the pirates didn’t stand a chance. They had the superiority of numbers and desperation on their side, but their shots just bounced off the *Imperial Star*’s defender’s heavy armor while the controlled bursts from their heavy rifles tore through the pirates.

“Damn you stupid pests,” Jonathan shouted to his own fighters, hoping the insult would rouse their attention. “We have to get away from these guys!”

A few pirates turned to follow his orders. *That will have to do*, he thought and spun around himself, only to gasp and shout damnation at the armored furs they had met first, who now came marching towards them, blocking their only way of escape. To Jonathan’s amazement, they didn’t open fire but stepped aside to make way for a strange looking fox who carried some huge... thing on his shoulder. A moment later it indeed seemed as if all hell had broken loose around them.

###

Pflarrian smiled as he followed the armored troops through the hallways of the

*Imperial Star.* As expected they could not move very fast, but the pace was faster than the canine had estimated.

*The intimidation factor alone is enough to make the armor worth the effort, he mused. If they perform as well as I hope in a firefight I'll have a real winner at my paws. Mr. Panthera will be very pleased.*

The collifox's smile turned into a grin as he imagined how Tygon's father would race when he learned how much of a success the full body armor was. He would immediately contact business partners and make deals to sell large amounts of the armor to government and private organizations alike. Charles-Franklin Panthera was a very smart fur and knew how to turn something into a financial success, and with something that worked so well the final success should be awesome, to say the very least.

That of course meant certain perks for Pflarrian as well. He didn't care too much for the money, though it was nice. It was the freedom he would get that he craved. Freedom to work on his many projects without anybody asking for meaning, direction, or justification.

"Sir, it seems like group three has stopped the pirates."

The voice of the leader of Defender Group one roused Pflarrian from his musing. "Excellent. We will trap them between us. Advance, but hold your fire, Captain. I have a little surprise for them. Maximilian, ready the launcher," Pflarrian advised his assistant. The smaller vulpine immediately went to carry Pflarrian's order out, his paws flying over a long, boxy object on the cart.

The group marched around a corner in the hallway and the sounds from the firefight they had heard for a while now grew distinctly louder. Pflarrian tried to peer through the defenders, wanting to see the armor in action. However, he was going to be disappointed since he could barely see anything of Group three through the pirates.

"The launcher is ready," Maximilian said, distracting Pflarrian from the fight.

"Ah, very good," the collie-fox hybrid replied. "Help me lift it."

Pflarrian grabbed the large object and with his assistance's help lifted it onto his shoulder. "On my sign you clear an isle for me, Captain," the engineer said. "And you make sure that nofur and nothing is behind me," he added, turning to Maximilian.

With a few steps Pflarrian positioned himself behind the armored furs and put his right eye behind the scope, pointing the launcher towards where he estimated the pirates to be. "Now, Captain!" he shouted and the soldiers stepped aside, making the way free for him. The collifox saw how some of the pirates turned around just as he lowered the crosshair on them. With a wide grin, partly because he was able to give the pirate scum the beating they deserved but mostly because he was able to finally try out one of his new

inventions, Pflarrian pulled the trigger.

There was a tremendous noise as the mechanism inside of the launcher ignited the small amount of fuel that was stored in the missile it held. Part of the resulting blast was exhausted through the back of the launcher by a small venting system Pflarrian had installed to reduce the recoil. The rest, however, was still enough to propel the small rocket forward towards its target.

From the day Pflarrian had first studied rocket launchers as they were used on various planes, he had envisioned one that could be carried by a fur and used in fights. Of course, there were lots of problems to solve. First, the rockets fired by planes were far too big for practical use. The canine had to design smaller ones but the problems didn't stop there. The blast from the rocket's small engine was far too dangerous to have it happen close to a fur, so Pflarrian had to build a casing around it. He went through quite a few prototypes before he finally arrived at a version that would protect the fur who was using it, allow some of the blast to vent so the recoil would not pull the launcher out of the gunner's paws while still putting up enough resistance to let the rocket fly at a decent speed.

With the basic work done Pflarrian was now working on improving the aiming mechanism, as well as experimenting with some different types of rockets.

The hybrid was very pleased to see that his work was carrying fruit for the rocket went straight towards the pirates and impacted in their middle, detonating with a deafening bang.

The actual explosion was pretty small. After all, Pflarrian didn't want to blow a hole in the *Imperial Star*. Most of the detonation consisted of noise and dark smoke, meant to confuse the pirates. The canine waited a moment and then shouted "Go get them!"

The defenders immediately marched forward into the chaos that only a few seconds before had been an admittedly well-organized band of pirate intruders.

Despite their relative immobility the defenders of the *Imperial Star* quickly subdued the pirates while Pflarrian and Maximilian lowered the launcher back on the cart.

"It got pretty hot, sir," the fennec said.

"Yes, I noticed that," Pflarrian replied, half lost in thought. "Perhaps some cooling fins here and there... Might also make it look better..."

With possible new designs going through his head Pflarrian walked down the hallway, Maximilian pushing the cart behind him, the two of them leaving the armored troops to deal with the pirates.

###

In the almost ten minutes since Tygon had dropped from the hangar of the *Star* things had gone from pretty bad to hard-fought balance to slight superiority for the Battery Battlers. Now that more and more of the squadron's planes could join the fight they slowly but surely drove the pirates back.

The thing that amazed Tygon most was that the pirates were still fighting at all. Their strategy of keeping the Battlers from taking off had obviously failed. If he were in the pirate captain's place the striped lion would have ordered his squadron to retreat long ago.

The Brazos Marauders, who had been determined to be the attackers, didn't do such a thing at all. They kept fighting fiercely, which made no sense. Unless they had a surprise waiting and that was exactly what Tygon feared.

"Captain Panthera, Captain Panthera!" George Coleman's excited voice rang through the cockpit, making the noise of the battle outside seem pleasant. "Please come in, Captain Panthera."

"Not now, George," Tygon replied roughly. He really had better things to than deal with his adjutant now. "Cath, see if you can do something against that Firebrand," the feline went on, talking to one of his pilots. "I don't like how it keeps blowing up the *Star*'s turrets."

"Sure thing, Wildcat," Cathrene 'Cath' Turner replied and pulled her Brigand down towards the larger plane. The Firebrand was tough enough to stand quite some damage and the pilot was skilled enough to avoid the weapons it could not stand. Plus, the other pirates were doing their best to guard the Firebrand while it took out the *Imperial Star*'s turrets one by one.

Cath dived past the pirate plane, the fire from her Brigand's cannons leaving scorched marks on its heavy armor. Tygon was about to make a similar maneuver but the fire from a pirate Devastator forced him to fly a wide bow to avoid the high-velocity lead. He grunted as he recognized the heavier machine as the one he had fought earlier. He was pretty sure that the pilot of the Devastator was Lawrence Burne, Captain of the Brazos Marauders, an exceptionally good pilot who could control the heavy but still very maneuverable Devastator as if he was born in it.

"Time to show the canine who the dominant predator here is," Tygon said grimly as he pulled his Bloodhawk around and brought the Devastator into the center of his crosshair.

###

Lawrence nodded to himself as the Bloodhawk changed its course, leaving David alone. "How are things, Dynamite?"

“Scratched but alive,” the feline replied. “Just two more and I have this side free of turrets. You want to pull it through?”

“Yes, the canine hybrid replied. ”We’ve gone this far, we can finish it.”

“Whatever you say, boss.”

“The Corral is on its way. You make sure that you take out as many of the remaining turrets as you can.”

“Gotcha, boss,” David said over the radio. “There won’t be enough left of them to fill a cup.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. We’ll try to keep the Battlers off your back.”

“Show the guys how a real fur flies.”

Lawrence grinned wide as he replied. “You can bet your tail on thaaaaah!”

The canine never finished the sentence because his machine suddenly shook under the impacts of small-caliber bullets. He immediately pulled the Devastator around to get out of the stream of death from the Bloodhawk’s cannons. Fortunately for Lawrence the smaller plane carried only light weapons. If it had been different he might already be in an uncontrolled vertical dive.

The canine pulled his plane around, hoping to get behind the Bloodhawk, but the pilot seemed to have predicted that maneuver and used his machine’s superior maneuverability to not only avoid Lawrence’s attack but also to start another of his own. Bullets sliced through the air only centimeters from Lawrence’s cockpit and he caught a glimpse of the Bloodhawk’s pilot as the plane shot past his own. The hybrid’s expression darkened as his suspicions were confirmed. The machine that had bothered him earlier was piloted by the leader of the Battery Battlers, Tygon Panthera.

Lawrence could not suppress a growl. He had heard enough about Wildcat Panthera to know that the feline was everything the canine resented. A spoiled brat who got everything he wanted and eventually his daddy even bought him his own squadron. Good-for-nothing wannabe pilots who thought they knew everything. Well, this one was about to get a lesson in proper aerial combat, at least if Lawrence had anything to say about it.

###

Pflarrian was a strange sight on the bridge of the *Imperial Star*. The canine was in a rather good mood due to the successes of his inventions and it showed. Everyfur else in the large room seemed to be busy with something that might ensure the Battler’s victory for the attackers. Especially George Coleman, whom Pflarrian spotted at the radios. The

adjutant seemed to be extremely desperate for some reason.

The collie-fox hybrid rolled his eyes good-naturedly and walked over to Tygon's adjutant. The raccoon was basically a good fur. The problem was that he tended to be a little overenthusiastic, which was exactly what annoyed the hell out of Tygon. The captain of the Battlers preferred a rather laid-back atmosphere, unless he was flying.

"What's the problem, George?" Pflarrian asked in a pleasant tone as he reached the raccoon.

"I'm trying to reach Captain Panthera, Mr Collifox," George replied, looking up at the canine.

"Tygon has more important things to do than talk with you right now."

"But we have spotted a zeppelin approaching us and he needs to know," the raccoon said in a voice that sounded as if he was close to tears. Pflarrian however had no time to be amused about George's behavior for this was potentially catastrophic news.

"What? Where?" he demanded to know, his good mood shattered by the news.

"South-southwest," George replied, pointing to a mark on the small map in front of him.

Pflarrian hurried to the front part of the bridge where large windows gave view on the surrounding landscape so possible obstacles could be spotted easily. The hybrid grabbed one of the pairs of binoculars that always lay there and peered in the general south-southwest direction. Only a few moments later he cursed, for he focused his sight on a large, flying object, no doubt a zeppelin.

"Dammit," he murmured and hurried back to George and the radios. Pflarrian yanked the microphone out of the raccoon's paw and tried to reach Tygon.

"Tygon, please come in. Tygon, Tygon, do you read me? This is Pflarrian, please come in."

There was a moment of static before the feline's voice came from the speakers, slightly distorted by the noise around him. "Hang on, Pflarr. I'm a little busy."

"Well, you're gonna be much busier in a few minutes," Pflarrian replied in a worried tone, "because we've got a zeppelin incoming from south-southwest and I doubt it's the Appalachians, coming to our aid."

"Shit," Tygon shouted via the radio. "How are the *Star*'s turrets?"

Pflarrian looked over to George, who shook his head. "Negative on the turrets."

“Damn...” There was another moment of static before the commander of the Battery Battlers spoke again. “Pflarr, get to the hangar immediately and see that all remaining planes who can will carry torpedoes when they drop out. I’ll send in more machines for rearming as soon as I can spare some.”

“Roger that,” Pflarrian replied.

“Captain Panthera out.”

Pflarrian turned to George as soon as he had switched the mike off. “Go to the hangar and make sure that everything happens as Tygon ordered.”

“And you?” the raccoon asked.

The collifox was already on his way out of the bridge. “I have an idea.”

###

Tygon gritted his teeth as he throttled up and pulled the Bloodhawk skywards. The sudden acceleration in combination with gravity pushed him into the seat and made him squint his eyes. The maneuver brought his plane into what seemed to be a wide loop but at the peak of the bow he turned the Bloodhawk around and shot straight through the sky towards the *Imperial Star*.

Part of him regretted that he had to break out of the dogfight with Junior, but his squadron and the *Star*, which they were supposed to protect, were more important. If Pflarrian was right about the zeppelin that was approaching then they might be in big trouble very soon.

The Battery Battlers mostly consisted of fast and maneuverable fighters with only a few heavier planes that could be a threat to zeppelins. Realizing the flaw in his defense Tygon had ordered the only thing that made sense, namely rearming every plane that could carry them with torpedoes. He grunted with frustration for his Bloodhawk was one of those that could not. The huge rockets were just too big for the sleek plane. Their size and weight was the biggest disadvantage of the aerial torpedoes. It not only slowed them down so that they were totally useless against fighters, it actually made it possible for a gunner with a steady paw to shoot a torpedo out of the sky before it hit its target. Some of the bigger war zeppelins had turrets just for that purpose.

Tygon steered his plane around the *Imperial Star*, trying to get a picture of the damage the pirates had done. The port side looked pretty good but most of the starboard turrets were destroyed. The *Star* was outfitted with some rather large guns that made a zeppelin captain think twice before he attacked the freighter, but with these gone the airship was virtually defenseless.

The striped lion's eyes narrowed as he directed his Bloodhawk back into the battle. He hoped that they would be able to put up enough firepower to at least force the pirate zeppelin to retreat.

###

With quick movements Pflarrian opened a heavy door and entered a small chamber. With a flick of his paw he switched on the lights, illuminating what seemed to be a senseless mess of motors, chains and other machinery.

While it was true that the *Imperial Star* technically belonged to the Empire State it was a matter of fact that Panthera Inc., constructed, operated and owned the large freighter. Due to this, Pflarrian was allowed to do minor modifications to the zeppelin to incorporate those inventions of his that could not be carried by troops or installed in planes but needed a more sturdy support. The device he was just climbing into was one of those and he was particularly proud of it. The only problem was that he hadn't had a chance to test it.

The collifox sent a quick prayer to the powers that be as he pressed the ignition button for the large motors and his invention came to life.

###

Lawrence had been disappointed to the point of being enraged as the Bloodhawk had turned the loop into an escape maneuver. The canine knew that it made no sense to pursue the much faster plane and so he took advantage of the opportunity and tried to assess the situation.

It looked surprisingly good for the Battlers. They had recovered quickly from the first blow and now did their best to repay the pirates for the bloody nose they had received. In fact, right now the defenders of the *Imperial Star* were in a better position. They had superior numbers and better equipment on their side, plus their home-base was right here in the battle. Law had seen several of the Battler's planes land in the *Star*'s hangar, just to leave again after a minute, most likely refueled and rearmed.

Still, Lawrence calculated good chances for the Marauders. The *Corral* was on her way and with the *Star*'s turrets gone the Battlers didn't have much that was a danger to the military zeppelin. The plane's onboard cannons and even high-explosive rockets wouldn't make much of an impact on the heavily armored airship.

Directing himself back from his musing to the harsh reality of aerial combat, Lawrence pulled the Devastator around, back into the battle. The machine's heavy cannons spewed destruction at one of the Battler's planes that was about to fire at David's Firebrand.

"Thanks, boss," the tabby's voice came from the radio. Law didn't have time to reply

though for his plane suddenly shook violently as a rocket exploded close by.

“Darn!” the canine cursed as he fought with the controls, trying to get the *Devastator* back under control. The plane seemed to be determined to crash into the forests beneath but its pilot put all of his abilities and years of experience into the ring and eventually won the struggle.

Lawrence looked around, hoping to find the *Battler* who had fired the rocket at him but instead he saw something that made him smile. With cannons blasting, the *Corral* had entered the battlefield. The military zeppelin would finally turn the tables in the pirate’s favor, Law was sure of that. That would show the *Battlers* and this no-good *Panthera* who ruled the skies.

But the canine was in for a shock a moment later. A trail of white smoke suddenly shot from the side of the *Imperial Star*, a metallic tip riding it until it collided with the *Corral* in a tremendous explosion. However, what shocked Law even more was that a second line of smoke followed the first almost immediately, showing the wake of a second torpedo before it, too, hit the pirate zeppelin.

“Holy shit!” he shouted. “Marauders! Take out that... whatever it is that’s firing torpedoes at the *Corral* before we have nothing to fly home to!”

The many planes of the *Marauders* left dogfights and whatever they were doing to attack the *Star*. However, the *Battery Battlers* were already regrouping to defend their zeppelin.

“This is not good,” Lawrence murmured as he, too, directed his *Devastator* towards the larger airship. “Not good at all.”

###

Tygon could not suppress a shout of jubilation as he noticed the first torpedo crossing the distance between the *Star* and the pirate zeppelin. He was not entirely sure what had happened, but he sure wasn’t going to complain about it.

As the pirate zeppelin approached, Tygon had already feared that they would lose the fight. Pirates normally kept their airships out of combat because they were far too valuable for them to risk. As a result, the *Battery Battlers* were not really prepared to fight against zeppelins.

But the sudden rain of torpedoes was a possibility to turn things around and the striped lion was determined to make good use of it.

“*Battery Battlers*, this is Captain *Panthera*,” he called his squadron via the radio. “Immediately regroup to defend that new turret on the *Star*. It’s our only chance to drive the pirates back.”

Tygon smiled as he saw the Battlers follow his orders. The fighters broke from the Marauders and fell back to their own zeppelin. The pirates immediately targeted the source of the torpedo hail but the Battlers did their best to fend off every attack. Their captain grinned as he readied his last beeper and lowered his Bloodhawk to dive towards the pirate's Firebrand who was just making a run for the *Star*.

"Here, little Firebrand," Tygon said with an evil chuckle. "I have two more seekers with your name on them."

###

Inside of the *Imperial Star*, Pflarrian was laughing with delight. The collie-fox hybrid was strapped into his torpedo turret and used the controls to aim another of the heavy rockets at the pirate zeppelin. He grimaced as the torpedo's small engine was ignited and the weapon left the turret with a loud roar. His expression turned into one of glee a moment later though as the reloading mechanism he had constructed pushed another torpedo into the launcher.

The rapid-fire torpedo launcher had been a pet project of Pflarrian's for almost a year now. It had been at the end of last summer when the canine, by accident, had discovered a strange device in one of the storage hangars at the Panthera's private airfield.

"Hey Boss! What's this?" he had asked Tygon, dragging the object of his interest into the sunlight.

"That?" Tygon replied after taking a look at the device and thinking for a moment. "Oh yes. That's a torpedo launcher dad had his engineers build a while ago. As I understand it, the torpedoes are stored in that large box there and then launched through that tube, much like vehicle-based rocket launchers."

"Neat idea. Does it work?"

"Yes," the striped lion went on while adjusting the steering fins of the small civilian plane he owned. "But the rate of fire is terrible. They never quite figured that out."

Pflarrian had taken a long look at the torpedo launcher, inspecting the experimental device before he turned back to Tygon. "Would you mind if I try a few things with this?"

Tygon didn't and over the following months Pflarrian had spent lots of his free time working on the launcher. He completely disassembled the device to understand how it worked and how he could improve it. After several fruitless attempts he finally found a solution to the slow rate-of-fire problem. However, the downside was that the reloading mechanism became so big that it was impossible to install in a plane. So the engineer had, with Charles Panthera's permission, installed it on the *Imperial Star* as a defense turret against other zeppelins.

Of course, such things did not happen very often. Ergo Pflarrian had not had the opportunity to give the torpedo turret a proper test run. It of course had been a risk to use such a potentially destructive device without a proper test, but the canine was confident in his abilities as an engineer and his work. Plus, with the pirate zeppelin approaching he didn't really have a choice.

Another torpedo left the launcher, riding on a tail of fire. Only a few seconds later the next was launched. Pflarrian was filled with glee as his construction worked so much better than he had dared to hope.

###

Lawrence's mood had quickly changed from confidence to desperation. The *Corral* had been their ace in the sleeve but the Battlers were countering it superbly with some hidden trumpcards of their own. The coyote hybrid watched as one torpedo after the other hit the zeppelin, punching large gaps into its thick armor plating. His squadron did their best to eliminate the source of the torpedoes but this new turret was not as exposed as turrets normally were and the Battlers guarded it fiercely.

"I'm making my run now," Law heard David's voice via the radio.

"Good luck, Dynamite," another pilot replied.

"Be careful," Lawrence added. He pulled his Devastator around, trying to get another torpedo into the crosshair. The plane vibrated as the gun spat out a stream of bullets. While it was possible to shoot a torpedo out of the sky it required a pilot's full attention. So it happened that Law only noticed from the corner of his eye how the Bloodhawk dived for David's Firebrand. The commander of the Battery Battlers didn't waste his bullets on the heavy plane. Instead there was a thin trail of white smoke as a beeper shot towards the Firebrand and attached itself to it, just as had been done just a short time ago. Lawrence wanted to shout out a warning, but the feline had already pulled his large plane down to dive under the *Imperial Star*, out of the Bloodhawk's range. But Wildcat Panthera seemed to have predicted that maneuver for he pulled his plane upwards into a sweeping arc over the top of the *Star*. The last thing Law could see was how a missile shot from the Bloodhawk's right wing before both disappeared behind the larger zeppelin.

"Dynamite!" the canine called, hoping David was alright. "Dynamite, please come in."

There was a cruel moment of silence. Then Law sighed with relief as he heard the tabby's voice. "Rats! He hit one of my engines."

"Can you make it back to the *Corral*?"

“Yeah, assuming this guy doesn’t make Swiss cheese out of my plane first.”

“Don’t worry, man! I’ll be there in a moment.”

Lawrence set his plane’s engine to full power and crossed the distance between the two zeppelins in seconds. As he dived behind the *Star* he saw the Bloodhawk harassing David’s Firebrand with its cannons. Panthera had obviously launched his last remaining rockets.

Law lowered his plane’s nose a bit to get the Bloodhawk into the crosshair and fired. Only few bullets actually hit the smaller plane before Panthera pulled it away and shot out of range, but the canine hadn’t really intended to damage the Bloodhawk. It was enough to just chase Panthera away from David so he could escape.

“Now get the hell away from here, Dynamite!” Lawrence shouted. From the corner of his eye he saw the Firebrand mark a wide bow as David pulled the heavy plane around to return to the *Corral* while the canine sent another hail of bullets after the Bloodhawk.

It was getting worse with every passing moment. The Marauders were losing the fight, that much was clear now. Law saw only one way to still turn things around in his squadron’s favor and that was getting their troops onboard the *Star* to take out that torpedo turret.

With a flick of his finger he switched his radio to a special frequency that would give him a direct line to Jonathan Long and his boarding command. “Junior to Johnny, Junior to Johnny. Johnny, do you read me?”

Law waited but only static came from the radio.

“Johnny! This is important!” He tried to reach the wolf again. “Johnny, please answer!”

Again there was only static, but this time just for a moment. Then a strangely metallic sounding voice came in reply. “Johnny is dead, pirate scum!”

“NOOOOO!” Lawrence shouted in frustration and anger. He pulled his devastator around and fired the plane’s cannons as well as his last remaining high-explosive rocket at the *Imperial Star*. The bullets and the explosion left little more than scorched marks on the armored skin of the airship, but it helped greatly to vent some of the coyote’s anger.

He steered the fighter over the *Star* and towards the *Corral*.

“Brazos Marauders, this is Junior,” he spoke to his men and women over the radio. “We cannot win this fight anymore. Everyfur retreat back to the *Corral*.”

It pained Law to do this but he had no other choice. With great reluctance, he had to

admit that he underestimated the Battery Battlers' determination and resourcefulness.

"Next time, Wildcat," he promised, casting a last look at the *Imperial Star*. "Next time I'm prepared for you, no matter what kind of surprises you have up your sleeves."

###

Pflarrian leaned back with a sigh of relief as he saw that the pirate's zeppelin was slowly turning around. The plan had worked. His use of the torpedo turret had forced the pirates to retreat. *And just in time too*, the canine thought. He was down to his last two torpedoes. The airship the pirates used could withstand quite a lot of damage. He would have loved to take a look at what kind of armor it used.

The hybrid rubbed first his ears and then his eyes. Now that everything was over he realized what kind of strain the last minutes had put on him. Still, it had been a rather successful day from his point of view. The Battlers had not only fought back a pretty well-planned pirate attack, he himself had also been able to successfully field-test three of his inventions and they all worked better than he had hoped they would.

"Yes, a successful day indeed," he said with a smile while he reached behind himself to open the hatch that would allow him to leave the turret. But the heavy metal bars stayed where they were. Pflarrian's ears perked and he tried to push at a different angle but the hatch would not move.

"Uh-oh," he made and tried to turn around to see what was wrong. His efforts were doomed to be futile though, since there was simply not enough space to move inside of the turret.

"Hello?" he called a moment later, doing the only thing he could think of. "Help?" When several minutes passed with no answer, he gave a frustrated sigh. Stretching out in the cramped turret as best as he could, he pulled a small bag of peanuts out of one of his pockets, and his notebook from another. "Oh well," he muttered. "The boss'll get me out of here sooner or later. Might as well make the best of things." He grabbed for the battered hip-flask he kept on his belt and shook it gently. "I just hope he gets here before I run out of water..."

###

Tygon put his paw on the wall of the hallway to support himself as he yawned deeply. Almost two hours had passed since the pirates had retreated. Most of the Battlers wanted to pursue them to put a permanent end to their activities, but Tygon had kept them back. He knew that they were not in a state to take on the Marauders and their zeppelin. The squadron had returned to the *Star* and again the aftermath of the battle had proven to be even more exhausting than the battle itself. Tygon had to write report upon report, making sure all the officials who were supposed to know about the attack did know about it. After that he was forced to inspect the damage done to the *Imperial Star* and his

squadron. The latter wasn't looking too bad since some losses were expected after aerial combat, but the zeppelin had taken quite a lot of damage. Over half of the turrets were destroyed beyond repair and several of the large armor plates that protected the airship needed replacement. The hangar looked pretty bad, as did the hallways where Pflarrian and the armored troops had captured the pirate invaders, but that was mostly superficial damage.

The Battlers had forced the pirates back, but they had gotten a pretty bloody nose in the process. Of course, that was mostly because of the traitor among their ranks. Tygon was certain that there was such a traitor. How else could the Brazos Marauders have known when the scouts had shift change? How else could they have managed to enter the *Imperial Star* through the emergency hatch? The great cat had made sure that every possible thing was done to find that traitor before they reached their destination.

Right now however Tygon didn't want anything but to get back into his bed and sleep. "I hope Victoria won't mind," he murmured as he unlocked the door to their cabin. "I'm sorry that it took do long dear..." his voice trailed off as he found the bed and the room in general devoid of his fiancée. "Dear? Victoria? Where are you? It's me, Tygon."

There was a shuffling to his right and Tygon turned, stepping closer to the big closet. He was about to grab the handle as the door suddenly was flung open. Something hit Tygon all over his front and two arms wrapped tightly around him.

"Oh Tygon! I'm so glad that you're back," Victoria cried, burying her face in Tygon's chest.

"Dear... please, calm down." Tygon gently rubbed the Maine Coon Cat's back. "What happened?"

"The pirates... they... they... they... it was so terrible!"

"Sssh," the larger feline made. "It's alright, everything's fine now." His exhaustion forgotten Tygon picked Victoria up and carried her to the bed. Making soft, soothing sounds he put her down and hugged her gently. She immediately curled up in his embrace, sobbing into his chest.

Tygon's expression darkened and he had to suppress a growl that was rising in his throat. "Next time you won't get away that easily, Junior," he grumbled. "Because now it's personal."

The End... for now