

Moonlight streamed in through the narrow space in between the blinds that had been drawn over the large windows. The room itself had been lightly furnished with office desks and small tables, a single potted plant had been set in the back corner. Cold air from the air conditioner cascaded down and dispersed outward as it reached the floor or what few amenities had been scattered throughout. Hanging upon the wall opposite the blocked windows was a single analog clock, though the mundane item for keeping track of the passage of time meant nothing to the numerous occupants that inhabited the room.

Quiet whirring of motors or servos hummed a near silent symphony in conjunction with the air conditioning that blew throughout the room. Many metallic tails swayed back in forth, in metronome-like fashion, as the appendage's owner let out a near inaudible pinging sound. Each of the intricately designed forms all resembled a similar vulpine body with a variety of similarities and differences as clear upgrades were applied to some models. From across the known multiverse, the Paulas had gathered within this simple office of the Vulpines R' Us Tower to conduct critical research and planning.

The former policewoman, at least that was the career that the majority of the Paula's (and at least one Paul) held, had come from various points in history for this gathering. The iconic liquid body models seemed to undulate while they kept their head low in contemplation alongside their fellow cybernetic vixens. Earlier iterations of the beloved character emitted several beeping sounds as they continued calculations and database searches while also individually mentally seething over having to wait to acquire future upgrades. In the back of the room sat one Paula that was multiple sizes larger than any of the others; one would be forgiven for mistaking her vulpine shape for a bear given her astonishing size.

"I've got it!" one of the many mechanical vixens had suddenly exclaimed in her iconic monotone voice. Perhaps her outburst had been brought on by remnants of human excitement; her mind had already been networked into the hive-mind-like consciousness of the swarm of cybernetic foxes in their quest. Whatever had prompted the otherwise plain-sounding call of supposed victory had in turn disturbed the concentration of her conspecifics, dragging each robotic vulpine from their seemingly eternal quasi-dimensional communion.

Every single head spun and pairs of LED lights that made up their eyes fixated squarely upon the one vixen to have interrupted the grand assembly's tireless and time-consuming work.

“We’ve been at this for two full hours! Don’t keep us in suspense! Out with it already!” replied the many other mechanical foxes, their voices all carried the same robotic voice with no clear emotion.

“What lies beneath that hood must be--,” the first cybernetic vixen had begun to reveal. Her voice cut abruptly at the loud stomping coming from just beyond the door exiting the office space.

Every single mechanical head turned, some with a mechanical whir of servos and motors but all their emotionless faces betraying modest surprise, at the sound of the door to the office space being thrown open. A gloved hand rested upon the smooth surface and its arm had been wrapped in a purple sleeve. Following the limb back to its owner, the purple fabric rose over the shoulder and climbed upward, folding over the right side of the individual's face, and stretched to the floor like a window curtain. Just over where the unannounced character's right ear would be, should have been visible if there even was one, the purple color had swapped to a slightly dark blue the climbed the rest of the figure's head and fell down along the left side of their body.

Bright, almost glowing, yellow-orange eyes were all that one could see from beneath the shadow of their hood. Even the magnification and enhanced vision of the later stages of Paula failed to pierce the darkness beneath the bizarre guest's headwear. A shining emerald inlaid in a sterling silver setting had been sewn into the upper right side of the cloak, where the purple color met with blue over their body. Just beneath the long and flowing fabric, the stranger stood in well worn leather boots that were visibly scuffed from many different outings.

“This... belongs... to all... of you...” the unexpected visitor began to exclaim through overly exaggerated ragged panting. The collective group of cyber-vixens stared in otherwise silence, noting the somewhat deeper voice their guest carried; although nothing could be seen of his person, he was definitely male. Still gasping for breath, the stranger

shifted his left arm, where he had been cradling something at his side, before presenting what he carried to the congregation of mechanical foxes.

Mechanical ears pivoted upon their metallic domes and tails shot skyward in astonishment by the entity that their peculiarly dressed acquaintance had proffered. At first glance, it almost seemed as if the cloaked character had simply pulled yet another Paula from one of the infinite Paula-verses. This one had been fitted with the sleek, glossy black finish and somehow malleable body of the cybernetic liquid form; she was the quintessential apotheosis of a Paula as they had come to be known. What set this one apart from other attending futuristic vixens was the word “PRIME” carved into a small, outlined box on her neck. Optics contained within the small mechanical faces could be just faintly heard whirring as those in the back, and even some in the front that were left in awe, scanned and analyzed their newest member.

Wordless and still maintaining a light grip on the cybernetic vulpine, the cloaked man had at least finally managed to catch his breath. His yellow-orange eyes slowly began to survey the scene with silent curiosity of his own.

“Oops, sorry, was busy correcting people over the internet again. Are we there already? Oh, hey Paula, and Paula, and Paula, and Paula, and—,” the one cybernetic vixen that the cloaked stranger held had begun to say. Her words had been entirely overtaken by the sound of an audible gasp sound effect being played from her numerous conspecifics.

“Paula Prime?! You’ve returned to us! Are you okay?! Where have you been?!” the many mechanical vixens had exclaimed in unison. At their united call, the gloved hands holding the prime vulpine released their grip upon her form. Upon landing deftly on her paws at his boot covered feet, the lead fox looked up to her companion to see that his hands now pressed against the sides of his head and the glowing eyes beneath his hood had shifted to display his discomfort with the uproar.

“Ow... that nearly blew out my eardrums... I don’t have noise suppression like you lot,” the hooded man complained aloud. He had just barely managed to pick up on another gasping sound effect being played over the ringing in his eardrums.

“He has ears! My theory that he might be--,” the same Paula that had initially interrupted the collaborative effort began to proclaim. Although her voice remained monotone and lifeless, her pure excitement could be sensed from her words. She had even gone so far as to start jumping enthusiastically in place.

“No, no, he said ‘eardrums’. I do like the enthusiasm, though. Be sure to pay attention; he might let something slip,” a different, earlier model of the fox had commented. Wordlessly, the first Paula had slowly stopped her jovial dancing. Having come to a rest, the cybernetic liquid fox sat upon her haunches before her body began to seemingly melt. Those nearest her watched as her form gradually seeped down to the floor into an embarrassed puddle. Ignoring the overly dramatic display of defeat, the prime fox turned back to the sole non-vulpine character in the room.

“So, same time next week then?” the robotic vixen inquired to her guest.

“Well, I’d like to but... can we please rescind that ‘no headwear’ rule? It normally takes me two or three repeats of making the same mistake to learn my lesson, but this one’s stickin’ with me,” replied the hooded individual with a hint of mild frustration in his voice.

“Hm... I suppose I’ll take it into consideration,” answered the prime vulpine while lowering herself down upon her haunches. Wordlessly, she began to transmit a number of messages to other group members asking for their input on the cloaked figure’s request. She had already made up her own mind regarding the matter but would at least allow her visitor’s request the dignity of a vote. With all of the messages sent, the vixen internally pondered how long it might take to receive a response given the nature of everyone’s departure from the previous gathering.

“That’s the best I’m gonna get, isn’t it? Mngh... well, I need to get going now so—,” the cloaked man had begun to grumble while turning to exit out the door. He paused abruptly a loud siren had begun blaring, his shoulders visibly stiffened at the sudden wailing of the alarm. He turned back to see many pairs of little LED eyes staring in his direction.

“Wait!” snapped one of the cybernetic liquid foxes.

“You expect us to just let you walk out of here,” another had begun to seemingly threaten. A wave of dread had washed over the hooded man as he silently awaited whatever it was that the swarm of robotic vixens demanded of him.

“Without telling us what happened?” a third had finished the question. An audible sigh of relief had escaped the cloaked figure’s lungs; he had feared that the multiple Paulas would attempt the same thing everyone at the meeting hall had to uncover what lie beneath his hood. Nothing concerned him more in that moment than the thought of having to hunt the vast multiverses for the innumerable mechanical foxes alongside his fellow group members.

“How did you find Paula Prime?” asked a fourth Paula.

“We had devoted ten percent of our collective processing power to pinpointing Paula Prime’s location,” explained yet another one of the many robotic vulpines. This one’s comment had garnered the attention of the prime fox; focused LED eyes had fixated upon the one vixen that had made mention of the group’s efforts to locate Paula Prime.

“Only ten percent? What was the rest for while I was gone?” ordered the prime vixen as she scanned the room of her fellow foxes. After a brief moment of awkward silence, none of the Paulas wanting to be the one to confess, one of the earlier versions of the mechanical fox jumped up on a metal desk.

“One percent to contracting more Paulas from across the multiverse to bolster the collective effort, seven percent to plotting revenge on a certain three-tailed tod, forty-six percent to unraveling the mystery of the hood over there, twenty-four percent to casual day trading, and eleven percent to browsing fox images over the internet,” answered the vulpine before another brief stillness fell over the room. All eyes, even the yellow-orange orbs beneath the two-tone hood, had focused upon the prime vixen. Considering the answer to what the congregated Paulas had been doing in her absence, the fox nodded her head without a word, seemingly satisfied with the answer she had received. Her unspoken complacency had been met with a curious hum from her cloaked companion standing in the doorway.

“Wait... doesn’t that only add up to ninety-nine percent? What about that last one percent?” asked the hooded man.

“You need not concern yourself with matters you cannot possibly understand, creature of flesh,” replied one of the vixens within the crowd. This one’s eyes were glowing a threatening shade of dark red as it fixated upon the outsider. Somewhat frightened by the response, the cloaked man merely glanced from the intimidating fox to the prime at his feet before looking back to the frightening one mere meters away with wide eyes.

“Don’t worry, that’s just Edgy-Paula; she’s always like that. Anyways, stick around and help me tell the story about our grand adventure,” Paula Prime reassured with a dismissive wave of her forepaw. At first, the strangely garbed individual groaned uneasily but had relented with a quiet sigh.

“Well... I guess I got some time. I mean, I already checked in on a few others I’ve yet to put back in their proper places. Yeah, I’m sure they can hold out for a little longer,” replied the hooded man. With a low and thoughtful hum, a gloved finger was brought up to where his supposed chin would be beneath the cover of his hood, “Anyways, where to begin? I guess it all started like this:”



=REBOOTING=

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=INITIALIZATION SUCCESSFUL=

=WELCOME BACK, PAULA PRIME=

“Oh frig, what happened? When did I shut down?” Paula Prime commented aloud. With her subsystems still in the process of performing diagnostics and restart procedures, she had attempted to reform herself from the mass of cybernetic liquid goop she had been reduced to. Much to the puddle’s annoyance, her body failed to take shape during the ongoing system scans. Having to wait an agonizing, full seven seconds for everything to

return her systems, files, functions, and databases to full operation, the futuristic entity began to reform herself again.

Paula Prime wasted no time in running the program that would call upon the fluid mass comprising her being. The dark colored liquid swirled around itself as it built up the vixen's usual shape. First the body began to take its form, generating a small canid's torso, whereupon the legs, head, and tail all flowed out from the centerpiece like noodles. Soon, the limbs that protruded from her body began to undulate rapidly as the finer detail began to grow into the appendages. Once her intricately designed, cybernetic liquid fox body had returned to its true glory, Paula Prime immediately took issue with how her glossy body had become besmirched by clumps of mud sliding off her.

Shaking the damp soil from her being, Paula Prime took played a sound effect that sounded like a feminine sigh of relief to have cleared herself of the stains. However, whatever relief the vixen had been feeling in the moment had been short lived as she finally looked up to her surroundings. Wordless, and emotionless given her robotic face, the vulpine found that she stood surrounded by a light fog. Thick and massive trees grew from the ground and from beneath large pools of water scattered throughout the area. Lush green leaves comprised an organic and natural ceiling overhead that minimal sunlight managed to punch through. Large vines crept up many of the thick trunks of the numerous trees and hung from the canopy. The splash of something jumping into the water somewhere out of sight echoed throughout the area while large insects buzzed past the vixen's metallic face.

“This doesn't look like our meeting hall... How did I end up here?” the cybernetic fox inquired to no one. With no one around to provide an answer, Paula Prime quickly accessed her databanks to review the events of the evening. The scene played out before her as if she had traveled back through time. She had dropped down from the ceiling on top of that rule-breaking, hood wearing hooligan so that everyone at the meet could pry the forbidden headwear off his person. Just before the image cut to static, there was one final cry of frightened concern.

You don't understand the consequences!

“Right... can’t say I quite expected that result. Well, guess I should send out an SOS message; the Cross Dimensional Paula Task Force will be sure to come get me,” Paula Prime said aloud to herself before settling down on her haunches. Her internal processor quickly generated an emergency signal and attempted to transmit it to her vulpine-only, interdimensional servers.

=ERROR: FAILED TO CONNECT TO SERVER=

=ERROR: FAILED TO CONTACT C.D.P.T.F. EMERGENCY CHANNELS=

=ERROR: NO NEW FOX IMAGES FOUND=

“Hmm... that doesn’t seem quite right. Guess I’m on my own for now,” Paula Prime had concluded while rising back to all four of her paws. Surveying the scene around her, she listened to the many buzzing insects that flew in the air over her head and the occasional splash of something dropping into the murky water. Her internal weather monitoring devices indicated that the surrounding area was unpleasantly humid; another benefit to having a cybernetic body being that she did not have to suffer the harsh climate.

For a moment, the vulpine focused on her internal GPS unit as she attempted to pinpoint her location. Much to the vixen’s frustration, the device merely returned error after error as she was unable to link up with any orbiting satellites. Rather, the fact how she failed to locate any networks or connections in the first place indicated to her that perhaps there might not be any satellites to reach out to for tracking her movement through the swamp. Somewhat annoyed, the fox had elected to go with the old-fashioned means of keeping track of direction and inspected her online compass to help her gather her bearings.

Once Paula Prime had finally figured out north from south, the vixen began a brisk jog through the muddy bog. She pounced across thin waterways and atop felled trees to keep from splashing down into the water. There was no fear that the liquid might interfere with her mechanical components, just that she did not want more mud on her sleek and glossy form. At one point, the cybernetic fox came across a large alligator lazily floating in the shallow water near a bank of the muddied landscape she had been treading across. While the large reptile likely posed no real threat to her, the vulpine decided it would be best to keep clear while she journeyed forth in search of help or civilization. Her march continued for

another few minutes before a louder splash rang out from what she had been use to hearing and her ears swiveled in the direction of the source as something else echoed throughout the area.

“Ah, ahhh!” came a frightened cry from somewhere beyond some nearby brush. Paula Prime cocked her head to one side while replaying the sound in her mind.

“That startled, girlish scream... sounded somewhat familiar. That couldn’t have been... but... could it...?” the vixen quietly wondered to herself. Curious, she stalked over to the overgrown brush that separated her from whatever the source of the sound had been. With her lithe and fluid body, the fox had little issue crawling underneath the bushes and carefully pawed some of the low-lying branches out of her way to open a view into the clearing beyond.

The ears and tail upon the small fox’s body had stood straight up at the sight. Dressed in a cloak of purple and blue was familiar face, or rather it would be if his face were visible beneath the hood. Paula Prime was simply relieved to see the familiar orbs of yellow orange practically glowing from beneath the cover of the hood that somehow maintained its place over its owner’s head. However, what gave Paula Prime cause for concern was the fact that her companion hung several feet off the ground by a thick rope tightly knotted around his right ankle. While the purple fabric of his cloak had been caught up in the trap as well, the blue half of his garb hung down toward the ground. Although the plain clothes and several toolbelts he kept beneath his cloak were on full display, nothing about the character’s person had been revealed. Somewhat astonished that she had already come across someone that might be able to assist her, Paula Prime required just a moment to compose herself as she silently watched the ensnared character sway to and fro.

“Oh, for the love of—not again! How do I keep stepping in these things?!” the cloaked individual complained loudly while struggling to reach up for his tied ankle. He stopped at the sound of nearby rustling of the brush and allowed his hands to fall back down toward the ground beneath him.

“I thought I heard a familiar girly squeal. You need some help?” asked Paula Prime as she emerged from her hiding place within the bushes. Her companion let out a triumphant laugh and clapped his gloved hands together slowly at her appearance.

“Ah-ha! Oh, you have no idea how glad I am to see you! I was worried I’d be stomping through this bug-infested swamp and stepping in every single snare I come across for days just looking for you!” replied, the now apparently ecstatic, hooded man as he pointed a gloved finger over to where the trap had been prepared at the base of a nearby tree. Paula Prime slowly padded over to the simple mechanism that kept the trap from releasing the cloaked character.

“Who did this to you?” Paula Prime asked her currently immobilized acquaintance. Despite being upside down and swaying gently from side to side, the peculiar person huffed loudly while giving an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders.

“Oh, just some little raptor-like critters with feathered plumage along their necks. Said something about ‘gettin’ a heckin’ point’ before leaving me in the first snare,” answered the veiled individual. Whether he remained oblivious to the potential danger or unconcerned had left the vixen somewhat perplexed as she stood over the rope trap’s mechanism. Looking down to her right forepaw, she watched as the toes on the limb began to extend.

“First snare? How long ago was that?” the vulpine further inquired as the elongated toes upon her paw began to shift and flow. The two toes began to narrow out and form sharpened edges that directed up and down; she had effectively made a set of scissors out of her cybernetic liquid appendage. As she carefully set the rope keeping her companion suspended in the air, her ears swiveled back in the direction of his low humming.

“About six snares ago, soooooo... maybe an hour ago?” the cloaked character mused aloud. Still swaying gently from side to side and upside down over the swampy marshes, he crossed his arms over his chest; he looked all the world as though being in such a peculiar state were nothing out of the ordinary. Paula Prime merely stared at her acquaintance, her sleek, robotic face unable to convey the bewilderment she had felt regarding the care-free, ‘business as usual’ attitude the hooded individual was displaying. Turning back to the rope

between the sharpened blades that extended from her paw, the vulpine thought about how desperately she wished she could roll her eyes in her current form.

“Walking into a trap every ten minutes? I would think you’d at least start watching your step,” stated Paula Prime, her monotone voice unable to fully differentiate whether she were concerned or sarcastic with her associate’s inability to look after himself. Without another word, the two blades upon her paw sliced through the thick rope where an audible gasp of surprise escaped the cloaked man as he plummeted from his position in the air. The cybernetic vulpine turned just in time to see the blue and purple garb drop into the cold, murky water of the swamp with an audible splash.

“Ah! Ow...” the hooded character groaned after a short spell of hacking and spitting out the muddied waters he had been deposited into. Paula Prime swiftly and quietly padded over to the bank and pounced upon a nearby log where her companion had landed.

“Are you alright? That looked like it hurt,” Paula Prime asked, again her robotic voice unable to convey any potential concern she felt. She watched as the cloaked man rose to his feet and stumble over to the nearest bank where he climbed out of the water.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I’m a little tougher than I look. I mean, not a lot, but a little bit,” the covered individual reassured with a gentle laugh. Paula Prime played disgruntled sighing sound effect while shaking her head back and forth. Sitting down upon her haunches, the vixen watched as her companion attempted to wring some of the muddy water from his two-colored cloak. Shaking his hands vigorously and flinging mud back down into the nearby pool of water, he continued, “Besides, you can’t kill what’s already dead; you can only slow them down.”

At his poor attempt at humor, the cloaked man let loose another gentle laugh. Paula Prime had turned her attention elsewhere for only a second at the sound of something large splashing down in the swamp somewhere beyond some brush. Her ears swiveled back toward her companion as his apparent amusement had abruptly ceased, replaced with a startled, short gasp. Turning her attention back to the hooded figure, the vixen required an extra nanosecond to process what she found.

Tensed, gloved hands had been thrown skyward as the veiled character threw his head back. A large, black colored fountain of some ink-like substance sprayed into the air from the opening in his hood. The yellow orange eyes had vanished into the darkness and Paula Prime jumped back up to her paws as she observed a crude, stone axe was now lodged in her companion's face. Without lungs to gasp her astonishment, the vixen could only silently watch as her acquaintance fell back toward the ground.

Alarmed but unable to act, the vixen could only watch as the blue and purple cloak slowly began to fade into the same black color as the spray that flew from her companion's face. As his body collided with the marshy soil, his form had broken into a fluid substance and splashed across the ground in a black liquid-like mess. The throwing axe that had been the cause of Paula Prime's companion's untimely demise plopped into the dark, ink-like solution that coated the swamp floor. Immediately following the veiled character's destruction, an uproarious rustling of leaves from overhead could be heard.

Looking to the source of the raucous noise above her, Paula Prime was just as stunned by her companion's supposed passing by a familiar blue and purple cloaked form dropping from the lush canopy. Landing upon his boot covered feet with a quiet grunt, the hooded man hummed thoughtfully as he inspected the mess upon the ground that originally was himself. The robotic fox scanned the form in front of her only to be returned with analysis results that confirmed her associate that had previously suffered a fatal attack and fell apart into a pool of some black fluid yet lived.

“How did you do that?” Paula Prime inquired, relaxing only somewhat despite the unusual event she had just witnessed.

“Do what? Did I do something unusual? Sorry, I'm a little more interested in figuring out what just happened...” replied her veiled acquaintance with a playful tone in his voice. Somewhat annoyed by his dismissal of her entirely reasonable question, the vulpine watched as a gloved hand reached into the inky fluid. The hooded character's fingers had wrapped around the wooden haft of the throwing axe that had moments ago found a home in his skull. His eyes narrowed as he inspected the primitive tool, “What the—?”

The duo's attention had been taken away from the axe that the cloaked shape carried as yet another flew past his hooded head. Jumping to feet and paws, both humanoid and vixen turned in the direction from which the axe had come from. Standing at a distance of at least thirty meters away was another humanoid form that stood on digitigrade legs. Dark green scales coated the newcomer's body and sharp claws topped both his fingers and toes. He was draped in a fur poncho and loincloth with a toolbelt wrapped around his waist. There were several spare throwing axes hanging from his belt. A long tail swayed lazily behind him and despite the distance, Paula Prime could hear the audible growling. The duo's assailant had been some manner of lizardman and standing behind him was a massive bear with a mud caked, brown fur coat.

“Wait a second! What do you think you're doing?! I thought we had an understanding here!” shouted the hooded man toward the two's aggressor. In response to his outburst, the tall lizardman brought back his arm carrying another one of his many throwing axes. With a gasp, the cloaked shape dropped to the ground as another axe flew just over his head. Rising back to his feet with a low growl of his own, the hooded man kept his knees bent and brought up the throwing axe he had available, “It seems someone needs to be taught a lesson!”

Before her acquaintance could act, Paula Prime heard another loud splash from somewhere just behind the two. Once more the canopy overhead had begun to loudly rustle, several dark green leaves began to slowly drift down toward the ground. Turning her head, the fox took two hesitant and apprehensive steps back from the sight before her.

“Uh... I don't think he's throwing at least all of those axes at you,” cautioned the cybernetic vixen. Her acquaintance lowered his weapon and the eyes beneath his hood shifted to show his confusion.

“Wait, what? Then who's he throwing them—,” the hooded shape had begun to ask. His voice stopped abruptly as a large glob of sticky, clear fluid dropped down upon his head. Wiping the solution from atop his hood into the murky swamp water, he turned to inspect what the source of the strange liquid was. What he found was a wall of enormous scales, each one larger than the man himself. Looking up to the top of the unusual obstacle revealed the head of a colossal viper. Its jaw hung open where enormous fangs were dripping with

saliva. The hooded character glanced down to the small throwing axe he carried before looking back up to the monstrous reptile above him and his vulpine companion, “I, uh... yeah, I might be in a little over my head with this one.”

“**Uh, y’think?!**” snapped the cybernetic vixen as the viper began to slowly poise itself for a strike.

“Okay: back up strategy,” the cloaked character commented aloud while making sure to keep firm eye contact with the impressive viper that hissed loudly.

“**What’s that?**” Paula Prime asked while keeping her optics fixated upon the monumental reptile that rose over her and her associate. Her companion opened his gloved hand that carried the small throwing axe, allowing the crude tool to drop to the ground. As the scaled shape began to lunge forward, a purple sleeve had been thrown underneath the robotic vulpine’s stomach and pulled her from her perch upon the fallen tree.

“We run!” answered the vixen’s cloaked companion as he shifted his arm around and managed to seat Paula Prime on top of his hooded head. The vixen had planted her claws into the cloth to maintain a firm grip as she felt her acquaintance break into a sprint across the log she had been seated upon. Behind them, the viper had crashed down upon the place where the vulpine had been positioned; as its massive jaw snapped shut, the thick log broke into splinters.

Boots pounded against the makeshift bridge that the duo used to cross the swamp as they fled the monstrous reptile. Their attacker had quickly lifted itself back up and began to rush its fleeing prey. Paula Prime held onto the cloak of her companion as he leapt from one log to another and continued to storm through the marsh, her lower body jumping up and falling back down to the veiled man’s back with every step he took. Somewhat annoyed, but knowing now was not the proper time, she could not help but feel like a child’s toy with how she was being flung from side to side.

Turning her head to look back at the threatening reptile, Paula Prime watched as the viper hastily slithered closer and closer. It slipped between trees and into and out of the murky water as it advanced upon them. As the massive fangs made a reappearance when the viper drew close enough to strike again, she felt her claws dig deeper into the cloth she clung

to. Watching intently as the monstrous entity lunged forward again, Paula Prime heard an audible roar coming from somewhere nearby, the animalistic cry joined by the splashing of water. She turned to see the same lizardman that had previously been throwing axes at her acquaintance riding the enormous bear he had appeared with.

In the nick of time, the bear charged past the cloaked man still fleeing from the viper. As the ursine past the duo, the lizardman had grabbed an outstretched, gloved hand and pulled the cloaked man and the vulpine from the path of the attacking reptile as it rushed forward and crashed into another tall tree that fell to into the swamp after the impact. Hissing loudly, the viper turned to spy the large bear and its prey fleeing in a different direction now.

“There! We just gotta get in there!” exclaimed the hooded man while pointing out into the swamp. Paula Prime turned her head to follow the gloved finger as it directed her attention toward a peculiar sight given the remote location. A simple, stone well stood on a single marshy island in the middle of the bog.

“How is a well in the middle of nowhere going to help against that?!” the cybernetic vixen had shouted back at her companion as the unusual steed that she rode alongside the cloaked character and the lizardman continued to charge through the shallow water. She glanced back at the viper to see that it had still not given up the chase as the ursine ran for the strangely located well.

“Don’t worry about it!” answered the hooded man as he repositioned himself atop the broad shoulders of the bear. Keeping low and as steady as he could with Paula Prime still clinging to his hood, the cloaked character took several deep breaths. The duo’s savior had barked something in an incomprehensible language, prompting a burst of speed from his pet ursine. As the group neared the well, the veiled man leapt from the back of the bear.

Warnings blared across all of Paula Prime’s systems as she and her companion soared through the air over the swamp. Time seemed to slow down as the viper came in again for another attack; its jaw had opened wide with gargantuan fangs on display. Just as the two had dropped below the stone walls of the well and below the surface of the earth, the

monumental reptile had slammed into the stone and shattered the opening of the well. Dust and dirt fell with the two that plummeted into darkness.

Paula Prime felt her companion shift his body around into a dive as they continued to drop through the hole in the ground. Looking forward, she observed a dim light that was fast approaching as the air rushed past her vulpine form. Her companion's cloak was whipped into a frenzy as they only seemed to fall faster and faster toward the light. It was only as her companion pried her off of his head and held her cybernetic fox-like form with a hand over her head that she realized they had been falling toward a window that looked out upon a streetlamp-lit city street.

Glass shattered as the cloaked man's body slammed into the window. Small fragments shone brilliantly in the streetlight as they and the two associates fell toward the empty road a few feet below them. As though he had practiced it, the hooded individual had rolled over his shoulder and along his back as reached the ground before jumping to his feet and stumbling a short distance. Once he had regained his footing, the cloaked man turned back around to inspect the damage he had caused.

"Oh, boy... that was a close one, huh? That thing nearly took my hood off!" the hooded man announced with a jovial laugh.

"What a tragedy that would have been..." Paula Prime responded, her monotone voice perfectly encapsulating the sarcasm she would have otherwise applied to her words. The cybernetic vixen squirmed in the cloaked man's grasp for a minute as her captor continued to laugh at his poor excuse for a joke, **"Hey, so I appreciate you coming to get me out of that mess, but can you put me down now?"**

"Oh, right, sorry, sorry! Anyways, here we are. The Vulpines R' Us Tower and—," the veiled character had begun to say as he dropped Paula Prime upon the ground. Looking up to the building in front of them, his words had abruptly ceased. The tower was a magnificent skyscraper that reached high into the atmosphere. Most of the walls were made of massive, thick windows and near the top of the structure was the familiar group logo of a vulpine head. Simply stunned by the enormity of the tower, the hooded man merely asked, "There is an elevator in this place, right?"

“Yes, but it’s usually shut off to save power for the recharging stations. Besides, you’re a bit of a health-nut, aren’t you? Stairs are good for you,” Paula Prime answered, her robotic voice somehow managed to reflect her friendly teasing despite the usual monotone. As the cybernetic vixen began to pad toward the entrance to her tower, the cloaked man merely sighed while hanging his head low.

“Well... this’ll be my work out for the day...” the cloaked man grumbled quietly before following the cybernetic liquid fox toward the front door to the massive and impressive architecture.

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“Fifty-four flights of stairs later and here we are. Well, that wraps up that adventure... Ough, I could use a cold drink,” the hooded man concluded his tale with a deep sigh. In a brief display of complaining and exhaustion, his shoulders slumped down and back arced forward with gloved hands hanging low to the ground as he took in another deep breath. The glowing orbs beneath his hood disappeared for a moment and once they opened again, the cloaked individual found that one of the many foxes had offered him a large, glass bottle of vodka balanced atop her metallic head and between her swiveling ears. With a slight chuckle, not wanting to seem rude, he gently shook his head, “I do appreciate the thought, but just water’s fine.”

“Lot of fun you must be at parties...” replied the same vixen to be offering the bottle of vodka. Despite the signature monotone of the robotic vulpine, her obvious irritation had somehow still made its way into her words. A palpable awkwardness lingered throughout the room; if the numerous vulpines around him possessed the capability, the veiled character could practically sense he would be receiving numerous eyerolls for having declined the drink. With his eyes darting left and right, trying nervously to avoid eye contact with any of the vixens in the room, a different Paula approached with a simple glass of water carefully balanced atop her head the same way the first one had with the vodka.

“Oh, thanks much for that!” the cloaked individual exclaimed as he accepted the glass. The Paula had retreated back to her original spot within the mass of Paulas as the glass left her head. The guest threw his head back, the hood remaining perfectly in place despite the rapid motions, as the glass was lifted up to where his mouth supposedly hid. Within

seconds, the liquid had been drained and the glass set aside on a low table near the entrance door as the veiled man inhaled deeply.

“Well, thanks again for getting me out of that mess. Not sure what I would have done if you hadn’t come along,” the prime vixen stated, her robotic and monotone voice incapable of expressing any gratitude. She had already taken up her place in an interestingly designed throne surrounded by her fellow vulpine compatriots, both the back rest and seat to the elaborate chair were shaped like the head of a fox. Even both the armrests ended with an intricate carving of yet another vulpine.

“It’s just what I do at this point,” the hooded guest replied nonchalantly while adjusting his gloves. Once satisfied that his hands were comfortably covered, he proceeded to pull his hood forward while rolling his shoulders. As his arms fell back to his sides, the vixens noticed that his glowing eyes had narrowed as he quietly grumbled, “Thanks to a certain, arctic kitsune...”

“You know there’s no point in mumbling here: we heard that and he’s not here to be indignant no matter how much he’s at fault,” the largest Paula had called from the back of the room. Although she carried the same monotone, robotic voice, her volume had dramatically increased when compared to her smaller counterparts. Once more, the veiled visitor had covered his ears at the explosive response. As the ringing in his eardrums settled down again, he let loose a brief sigh while waving his hand dismissively.

“I’m also putting a little bit of fault on a certain silver and orange furred feline as well; she did just seem to encourage all this nonsense! Well, never mind that; so long as that fox remains chained to a bar and that cat is still being haunted by incessant jazz music, I’ll feel vindicated after everything that’s happened. Anyways, I’ve still got other hides to find and save, so this is goodbye for—,” the cloaked shape had started to say.

“Wait!” several of the monotone voices of the uncountable Paulas rang out. A gloved hand retreated from the doorknob it had been reaching for as wide, yellow orange eyes looked to the crowd with curious surprise.

“Before you go,” a different collection of the robotic vixens chimed in. The ones that had pitched into the incomplete phrase flashed their glowing LED light eyes in the cloaked character’s direction.

“We need to know,” yet another subset of the vulpines added. It was at this point that the hooded figure mentally questioned if this bit had been rehearsed prior to his and the leading, cybernetic fox’s arrival to the office space.

“What happened,” continued a fourth group of the collective hive mind. Simply having reminded himself that they were a collective entity, their well-choreographed display given such short notice made all the more sense. While the performance was amusing, the veiled man shook his right arm whereupon a small pocket watch fell from within his sleeve. He had simply intended to note the time; surely whatever the numerous vixens had in mind would not take long.

“With human Paula?” finished a final team from the wider population of Paulas. Having been posed an otherwise normal question seemed to catch the vixens’ guest off guard. Eyes beneath his hood had gone wide and the pocket watch he dropped from his sleeve fell past his fingers where it crashed upon the floor by his boots with a loud thud and then rolled a short distance away. Unable to even utter a single word, the cloaked individual slowly turned to look directly into the blinking lights that made up the prime vixen’s eyes.

“Hey, don’t look at me. I was busy stomping through a swamp, remember?” Paula Prime reminded the hooded guest, her monotone voice somehow seemed to carry a sense of care-free nonchalance. The hooded guest let out an uneasy groan as he turned back to the wider collection of robotic foxes. Once more, all of the small, glowing lights that made their eyes were focused on him. Stage fright had finally caught up to him as his legs went weak and he nervously began rubbing his hands together out of habit. With a deep breath, the cloaked visitor carefully planned his next words.

“Okay, so here’s how that one played out: first—,” the hooded man began to say. His own voice had been drowned out by the whirring of servos and motors from some of the earlier models of Paula. Having all the pairs of beady, little, LED light bulbs that comprised

pairs of eyes and mechanical ears swiveled in his direction had flooded the cloaked individual with an abundance of self-consciousness.

“Oh, would you look at the time! Gotta go!” the awkward man exclaimed while crouching down to collect his pocket watch. He had not even opened the cover to the small time-keeping device, denoting his lack of a proper excuse, and threw the brass contraption into his sleeve. Not willing to put in the effort to stop their guest, all of the mechanical foxes watched with their ears lowered in disappointment as he bolted for the door and slammed it shut behind him. The gathering of vixens waited patiently in the office space, listening to the stomp of boots rushing down the stairs, until the cloaked man’s tread could no longer be heard. Collectively, the numerous cybernetic canids played an annoyed sigh sound effect.

“**Yeah, he’s no fun at parties at all...**” commented the same Paula that still had the bottle of vodka perched atop her metallic head. No sooner had she finished her slight at the congregation’s rude guest for his abrupt departure, the sound of stomping boots could be heard nearing the office door once more. Similar to his first entry, the door had been thrown open where it had collided with the wall. Unlike his initial entrance, however, a gloved hand had hastily reached over and slammed the door shut where he then forced his back against the wooden surface with his arms outstretched and frightened shock in his glowing eyes.

“**Well, well, well, come crawling back, did you?**” a different Paula called out to the cloaked individual as she approached. If their voices could express smugness, her own would have been thick with superiority. She halted her advance as two wide and glowing orbs of yellow and orange fell upon her.

“You don’t understand! There are foxes out there!” the cloaked character had shouted in frantic haste. He adjusted his footing, his boots stomping loudly as they fell heavily upon the ground. All the while, his blue and purple sleeves remained spread out to his sides.

“**Wait, what? How many foxes are we talking?**” Paula Prime had inquired curiously.

“All of them!” shouted the vixen’s guest in a manic fit of lunacy. His reply had been met with a sudden battering of the door behind him. All of the mechanical foxes in the room

alongside him rose to their small paws, each of them on full alert now. They watched as the blue and purple cloaked man desperately fought to keep his footing, the door behind him being continually rammed from a force on the outside. Mechanical ears swiveled and tails remained still as stone as the bone-chilling snarl rang out from behind the office space's entrance door.

“Jaaaaawwwwnnnnnnnn uuuuuuuuuuzzzz.”