

Chapter 05//REPRISAL

<< Force Point Temple, Planet Sauria >>

There was no need to inform him that the Grand Gambit's attempt to breach the door had failed. The power of his flagship's main gun had sent vibrations through the entire facility. The strength of Krazoan construction was admirable, but even they weren't capable of deafening the shockwave of a direct hit. When Lieutenant Kanis arrived to debrief him on the breach attempt, he already knew what to expect.

"Admiral, the Grand Gambit reports that there was no effect on the bulkhead at all. Our troops stationed on the other side of the door have mild injuries from the impact, but that's the only damage they've reported. The door is unscathed."

"Remarkable, isn't it? This ancient tomb."

"Sir? Should I have the Grand Gambit ready for another attempt?"

"No, it'll have no effect. If it can withstand a direct hit from the main gun, then this facility was built to survive even an orbital impact."

"Yes, Sir. That is the report, Sir, unless you would have me do something more?"

The Admiral had seated himself at a distance from his men, watching from afar as the science team continued their efforts to breach the door they'd all entered from, but also watching as his command coordinated his troops inside and out. With the energy field overhead they had no reason to fear the Cornerians, so Scales had ordered his men to continue their duties as if situation normal.

There was a hiss to his right side, and by the time he'd turned to face the doorway it was already sliding open to the cheers of everyone inside. The men who'd been trapped on both sides of the door greeted each other with relief. There was good news at last.

"Admiral, I believe we've cracked the code!" Dr Boone shouted to him with triumph.

"Excellent! Pass your 'code' to every team in the facility that would have the means to use it. I want every door opened at once!" Scales shouted back.

"Lieutenant!" He then barked at his senior officer.

"Sir!"

“Update the Grand Gambit and the rest of the fleet with the news of our situation and have them ready themselves for combat. All units should be at a moment’s ready should our circumstances change!”

“Yes, Sir!” The Lieutenant snapped a salute and pivoted on a heel to return to communications. The science team was already busy with their own radios signaling their findings to everyone in the facility while the others moved their equipment out and towards the next sealed door.

Progress at last, he thought with a smile.

<< DarkIce Mines, Planet Sauria >>

On his way back through the cave tunnel Fox narrowly avoided a pair of guards that were coming to retrieve the pot of food and the utensils. Hiding in a storage pocket he waited until they’d gone by before quietly continuing back down the way he’d come. The camp was just as relaxed now as it had been before. Skirting by its edge and following the cave wall was as simple as it had been the first time.

The only thing that had him concerned now was traveling back to the jungle. He got lucky with the free ride the first time, and he didn’t know how often those shuttles were planned to ship out, and to where they’d be going. Last thing he needed was to accidentally wind up on an enemy cruiser with only his blaster and an ancient paper weight hanging off his belt.

Sauria’s winter cold was biting him in the face again as soon as he’d freed himself from the caves and hid himself from plain view by entering the nearby forest. The caves had warmed him up a bit, but now he was back to the biting cold of the worst weather he’d been in since... Years. He spent too much time in space.

In the distance he heard an ATV running but didn’t pay it that much mind. Perhaps it was the one from before carrying food, the cook had mentioned he’d have more food ready, didn’t he? That was probably it, so Fox continued through the snow and past the camp that housed the bulk of the troops stationed above ground. When he reached the landing pads, he saw that there was new activity with two shuttles being loaded with crates. They looked like they were in a hurry, but so was he. If one or both of those shuttles was going somewhere then maybe he could hitch a ride, and if he needed to, he could ‘suggest’ a destination.

Fox moved his way to the far side of the camp and watched the troop movements in detail with his HDD. One shuttle launched, leaving just the one left on the tarmac with its engines pumping out steam. Realizing his ticket out was going to take off soon he had no choice but to slip down into the camp and hurry out of view before being spotted. With the mingling soldiers distracted by their duties it wasn’t hard to reach the shuttle.

“Is that the last of it?” Someone, possibly the pilot, shouted.

“Two more crates, then that’ll do it.”

Ducking around toward the nose of the craft he saw he was clear and took a bold peek around the side of the shuttle to see the pilot standing with his back turned to him as other soldiers busied themselves with a forklift loaded with two crates like the ones he’d seen stored on the other side of the camp.

If that was the pilot, then no one was in the cockpit! He moved back around to the other side of the shuttle and jumped up the side and grabbed the bottom rung of the access ladder. After pulling himself up he peeked through the window, saw the cockpit was empty, and that it was a two-seater. He popped the hatch and dipped inside the cockpit before shutting the hatch behind him and climbing into the back to hide behind the pilot’s seat.

A few minutes later the hatch on the opposite side of the craft opened and someone climbed inside, shutting the hatch behind them. Fox reached up to his headset and thumbed in the coordinates of the research camp.

“Operator, Shuttle 102 loaded. Requesting Clearance for launch, over.” The pilot was talking through his radio.

“Roger, lifting off for the Temple LZ, over”

Good! Fox waited until they’d been in the air for about half an hour before making his move.

“Howdy!” Fox shouted, surprising the pilot out of his boots before pressing the barrel of his blaster against the ape’s cheekbone. “Mind taking your helmet off for me?”

The pilot cautiously complied, removing his helmet, and his radio, and setting it down on the console in front of him.

“Good, now keep going where you’re going so I can get captured by your friends at the Temple.” Fox lied. He didn’t have any intentions on landing where the pilot thought he’d be landing.

His unwilling pilot dutifully flew him towards their mutual destination. The trip was silent, apart from the muttered comment that Fox was outnumbered and outgunned, which was all completely true! Fox was well aware of the uneven playing field, but that wasn’t about to stop him from poking his nose where it wasn’t wanted. If he was to figure out a solution to this mess, then going to this ‘Force Point Temple’ would be the best place to start. Whatever was there had clearly piqued Andross’ interest.

So much time had passed since he'd first smuggled his way up north, that the sun was now setting ahead of them as they flew. Soon it would be nightfall, and finally Fox could worry a little less about sticking out amidst the trees. As they made their final approach Fox noticed a black streak of terrain, wide as a river and miles long. As the pilot continued to fly towards the strange terrain he had to ask.

"What happened there?"

"Same thing that'll happen to you and your friends."

Fox frowned and adjusted the grip he had on his blaster. He'd been keeping his weapon trained on the pilot's temple this whole time, and he was getting tired of holding his gun in the air, but the situation demanded he keep the pilot's eyes forward and hand obedient.

"Didn't answer my question." He replied, pressing the barrel a little tighter against the pilot's head.

"Shoot me and we go down."

"I'm a pilot, you idiot, now tell me what happened down there."

"That's what happens when the Admiral's flagship fires its main gun. It's the Emperor's finest weapon!"

"Uh huh, I've blown a few of those up in my day."

Fox was growing concerned, but he didn't show it. Was this the result of that explosion he'd felt earlier in the day? It was starting to feel like it. He decided that now was the time to part ways with his captive.

"Well, looks like we're here." Fox said, carefully using his free hand to buckle his safety harness.

"When we land, you'll be surrounded!"

"Uh huh." Fox replied, reaching down to his belt to grab the heavy artifact. He didn't know what it was meant to be used for, but he was about to make it a weapon. He grabbed it by its midsection and lifted it, mentally preparing to strike the pilot unconscious so he could take over as co-pilot, but before he could engage his swing the artifact thrummed to life in his hand and expanded.

It happened so quickly that he jumped out of his skin about as hard as the pilot hit the controls. The artifact had stretched to nearly two meters in length with one end slamming into the pilot's cheekbone, breaking the skin and tossing him against the opposite side of the cockpit before

dropping face first to the console. Fox let go of his blaster and the artifact and threw his hands onto the controls, steering the ship back into a stable flight path.

Confused as to what had just happened, he ignored it for the moment and searched for a place in the jungle where he could crash land. Looking over to the pilot he felt pretty lucky, since Fox could bring the shuttle down and the pilot won't be waking up any time soon for him to confess that he didn't crash the shuttle himself. They'd have to take him to the nearest infirmary and wait for him to wake up before they could get anything out of him.

He shifted the controls, steering the shuttle to the left of where he wanted to ultimately be, before letting the shuttle's nose tank downward to start a nosedive that he aborted at the last minute. The shuttle's underbelly slammed through the jungle canopy, ripping through limb and trunk alike as the nose made first contact with the ground. Dirt exploded over the windshield just as the cockpit deployed its air cushions. The pilot was slammed painfully backwards into his seat by the force of the air bags, as Fox was slammed forward into them.

Fox snapped awake, probably having lost consciousness for a moment, the cockpit signaling a warning klaxon that several things were all going wrong at the same time. He shook off his confusion and shoved the deflating bag away as he unhooked his harness. It took him a good minute to find his blaster under the pilot's foot, then he lifted the artifact, still at its full length, and climbed out of the cockpit, being careful to shut the door back so no one would know there'd been a second occupant.

He didn't have time to question the artifacts' new shape. He immediately sprinted into the jungle, grateful that the sun was falling ever lower on the horizon with the light through the trees growing a deeper and deeper shade of orange and red. Soon it'd be dark, and he'd have a much easier time navigating his way through enemy lines.

<< Unknown Location, Planet Sauria >>

[Insurgents Have Now Bypassed Containment Protocols For Gate 03B.]

She felt helpless as the voice explained that they were breaking open yet another door. The more the voice spoke to her the more she'd begun to realize that she wasn't the only prisoner here. Her captors had been trapped inside the ruins just like her, and with them their leader, but if they were opening the doors then that meant they could get out, leaving her here in the process!

"How can they open the doors?"

[New Access Codes Are Being Forged Using The Alta Negla Algorithm.]

“I don’t know what that means!” She shouted in frustration. Everything the voice said was strange and foreign, talking about algorithms, protocols, sequences, like it was just a machine reading from a tech manual!

[The Alta Negla Algorithm Is The Last Security Protocol Used For Stronghold Primea Before Entering Dormancy.]

“If they are forging keys, then you can just lock the doors back!” She demanded.

[Insufficient Permissions.]

Permissions! This wasn’t the first time it talked of ‘Insufficient Permissions’! For a voice that was supposed to be in charge of this place it acted like it was helpless to do anything at all!

“But you closed them before, didn’t you?” She was exasperated.

[Containment Of Stronghold Primea Was Triggered When Interim Navigator Krystal Interfaced With Central Command. Foreign Organic Interface Requires Immediate Containment. No Permission Required.]

“So, when they put me in here you didn’t need permission to lock the doors?”

[Affirmative.]

“Who gives you permission?”

[Central Command Cannot Act Independently Without Navigator Instruction. Central Command Is Kept In Perpetual Thrall By The Masters.]

It would help her so much if it just spoke plain English! Central Command, Masters, and now this ‘perpetual thrall’, like it was some kind of walking thesaurus!

“So, you can’t stop them from opening the doors? Is that what you’re saying?”

[Insurgents Must Verify All Access Codes Prior To Breaking Containment Seal On All Gates. Verification Requires A 120 Second Time Delay During Containment.]

“So, are you slowing them down? Like, on purpose?” She asked, trying to figure out the voice’s intentions out one struggle at a time when her own helplessness screamed at her from the liquid void she appeared to float within.

[Affirmative.]

“Then you have to slow them down more! We don’t know what they want to do! There has to be something more you can do! You’re some kind of computer! Do something!” She exclaimed, wishing she still had fist with which to strike a countertop. Being a disembodied voice no different than the one she was arguing with was uncomfortable, like being disabled against her will, trapped within a body limp with paralysis.

[Insufficient Permissions. Central Command Cannot Act Independent Of Navigator Instruction. Master Programming Requires Obedience.]

“Some computer! Why would they put a computer in charge of everything if it can’t do anything!”

Her anger was piping hot, but she couldn’t feel any tears beading up in her eyes. She had no body; all she could do was think out her rage but not act it out on the world around her as a living breathing person could. Trapped in this void she truly was no different than the voice that only gave her excuses as to why it could not act.

[Central Command Has Full Control Of Stronghold Primea, However Masters Do Not Trust Artificial Intelligence. Without Navigator Instruction, Central Command’s Permissions Are Minimized To Prevent Rogue Behavior.]

What kind of rogue behavior could a computer do? Why have an AI if you didn’t trust it? This wasn’t her specialty, she hardly understood what her parents did, and they just dug in the dirt to dust off old pottery! The voice was just a computer, you just program it to do what you want it to do, don’t you? Even an alarm clock could wake you up in the morning without being told to!

“What do you mean, rogue behavior? You say that like they didn’t want you to do anything without being told to?”

[Affirmative.]

“So, a Krazoa, no, a ‘Master’,” She corrected herself, “They are the only ones who could tell you what to do? The only ones that can make you stop them?”

[Affirmative.]

The voice spoke without any emotion, as if it didn’t care either way what those soldiers did or why they were doing it. She felt disheartened, as there was simply nothing to be done, that she really was just a prisoner in a cell waiting for the end.

“Then there’s no way to stop them from getting out?” She whispered, the hope she’d been carrying, kept alive by her anger and frustration now began to dim.

“There’s no way for us to stop them from doing whatever they want with the Stronghold, is there?”

[Protocol Requires Any Foreign Organic That Interfaces With Central Command To Be Held In Stasis Until Masters End Containment. There Are No Masters On Primea. Defense Of Stronghold Primea Is Maximum Priority And Deep Scan Of Foreign Organic Krystal Confirms No Relation To Insurgent Force. Central Command Utilized Emergency Protocol Talpa Ulna Treo To Assign Foreign Organic Krystal Permissions Of Interim Navigator Until Insurgent Threat Is Neutralized.]

The voice finished, and Krystal had to take a moment to process all that it had said. There was a glimmer of something within her, like hope growing anew, but she felt fear, too. What if she was wrong?

“I’m a ‘Navigator’ now, but I’m not a Krazoa!” She exclaimed.

[Affirmative.] The voice replied, indifferent.

“How can I tell you what to do if I’m not a Krazoa? Tell me!” She demanded.

[Protocol Demands That Interim Navigator Assignment Shall Supersede Species Assignment, Interim Navigator Krystal.]

Despite how strangely the voice spoke to her, she wanted to believe that she understood what it was trying to tell her. If she still had lips, she’d have wet them nervously in anticipation of what she was about to ask.

“If I tell you what to do, will you do it?”

There was a brief pause.

[Affirmative.]

<< Force Point Temple, Planet Sauria >>

The jungle was thick enough to make it easy to hide his presence as he snuck his way closer to the Temple. He could hear in the far distance soldiers making their way to the crash site, which would keep everyone’s attention over there and not where he was going. Fox still had to assume they would keep their guard up however. They knew he was on planet, but not where.

He didn’t know enough about this Admiral Scales to know how dangerous he was, but Fox erred on the side that he was smart, seeing as how he’d managed to hide himself and his troops for eight years. That took talent.

How much time would he have before the pilot woke up and told them he'd been forced to fly at gunpoint? He didn't know, but being knocked out didn't usually last that long, not like it did in the movies. The artifact had hit the pilot hard though, so maybe he'd be out long enough to buy Fox the time he needed to figure out his next few steps.

When he reached the edge of the tree line the sun was dropping fast, and it was becoming harder to see by. It was his good fortune that the enemy wanted to keep everything well illuminated, because from his vantage point in the forest, he could see the spotlights they'd set up in the distance, and what he saw was chilling.

The blackened streak of earth he'd seen from the shuttle was now stretched out before him as the jungle transitioned to scorched soil. It stretched over a mile in length and hundreds of feet wide, like an almighty and angry God had reached down his hand and scooped out a trench with his four fingers. The Earth was burnt black, and he could still smell the odor of burning wood and soil.

This was supposed to be a site full of ancient ruins, but it didn't look like much of it survived. What was left in the newly forged trench were hastily made dirt paths for vehicles, and spotlights to keep them illuminated.

Fox pulled out his HDD and scanned the trench, counting the many soldiers on patrol, and settled his gaze on where the trench 'ended'. Judging by the damage Fox felt confident that a weapon of some kind had been fired at a target on the ground. A high yield bomb wouldn't create an elongated crater like this. This was an energy cannon of incredible power.

That pilot did mention something about it being one of Andross' finest weapons.

Deep in the opposite end of the crater he could see polished metal rising up from the scorched earth. This end had once been elevated terrain, probably a hill. Were they trying to uncover the Temple by blowing the dirt off? He couldn't believe anyone would be dumb enough to think that would work without destroying the Temple along with the countryside.

But there was obviously a Temple there, jutting out of the ground as polished white metal. Wasn't much to see from his position, but there wasn't much there. If his hunch from before had been right, and that the Force Point Temple was a military base, then it made sense since the Krazoa would have built it like a bunker. What he was looking at down was just an entry door.

Maybe that was it. Could they have been trying to blow the doors open? Fox put down his HDD and clipped it back to his belt. He thumbed his radio.

"Anyone awake up there?" Fox asked the Great Fox.

"Yo!" It was Falco. "You've been MIA for hours!"

“Yeah, I had to stow myself away on a shuttle. Took me north to an Imperial basecamp. Is anyone else there?”

“Uh, no, they’re getting some grub, you want everyone on the bridge?”

“No, just get them to radio in.” Fox replied, and waited while Falco worked a console he wasn’t familiar with. A few moments later and everyone had his ear.

“Fox, glad to hear you’re alright.” It was Peppy, and Slippy was there, too.

“I’m fine but haven’t gotten any closer to figuring this energy field out. I did; however, locate all but one of the civilians. They’re still in Imperial custody, but they are safe for now. The one member I haven’t found is a teenage girl, daughter of a married couple in the research team. She’s probably where I’m headed now, or maybe in another camp.”

“That’s bittersweet news.” Peppy replied.

“Yeah, and I can’t really bust them out with me being by myself.”

“Do you know their coordinates?” The hare asked.

Fox thumbed his headset and brought up his travel history. The energy field overhead was blocking all their sensors, but it wasn’t stopping his GPS from tracking his own movement.

“I can tell you the coordinates.” He replied, and began to read out the longitude and latitude, stopping part way to give them time to copy the information down before repeating himself.

“You had quite a hike to get up that far north, Fox.” Slippy pointed out.

“Nah, he hitched a ride on one of their shuttles.” Falco corrected.

“Give that to the Cornerians and maybe between the two of us we can figure out a way to bust them out when the shield drops. If it drops.” Fox told them.

“Speaking of shields, Fox, me and some Cornerian engineers have been trying to come up with some way to get through the field, but we’ve not gotten anywhere. This is way beyond anything we’ve encountered before.” Slippy jumped back in.

“Repeated weapons fire has done nothing. The Cornerians tried hammering it again with their biggest guns. Nada.” Falco added.

“That and none of our more sophisticated methods seem to work either. The harder we try to break it; the entire energy field seems to respond to it by increasing its strength wherever we’re trying to break through. It’s like a smart shield that reacts to aggression.” Slippy continued.

“And the rest of the shield doesn’t seem to weaken whenever it does this. If the researchers were correct that there was a power grid deep in the planet, then we can only assume the shield is being powered by thermal energy from the planet’s core.” Peppy added.

Fox reached up to rub a spot between his eyes before letting out a sigh.

“If the shield is being powered by the planet’s core, then it has a near limitless amount of power to draw from. Not that they’re obligated to listen to us but tell the Cornerians to stop wasting their ammo and fuel cells. Save them for when they have a real enemy to fight.” Fox said.

“Do you have a better idea of what we’re up against down there?” Peppy asked.

“I’ve seen several dozen soldiers, but there’s evidence to suggest they have more troops than what I’ve seen so far. Saw a couple of transport shuttles, but now I’m back at the original location where the researchers were doing their digs. Looks like someone tried blasting a hole into an underground bunker. I’m near the edge of a mile long crater, but I didn’t see what shot it. Assume that they have more warships and cruisers down here, but I can’t tell you how many.” He told them.

“Will do, Fox.” Peppy replied.

Fox watched the crater, and the handful patrols all keeping watch. Would it even be possible to get to the metal structure they’d uncovered? He didn’t know.

“Alright, I need to go radio silent for a while.” He said.

“Be careful, Fox, and keep in touch.” Peppy replied.

“Roger, out.”

He thumbed off his radio and started creeping through the thinning brush and charred debris with the cover of darkness masking his approach. Even with all their spotlights there were plenty of avenues for him to take to snake his way through their patrols. Security was way too lax, as if they weren’t bothered by the knowledge that one lone enemy soldier was somewhere out there, or that one of their own shuttles had just crashed.

Definitely overconfident out here, but that was good for him, since he was able to crouch low and use a pile of rubble to hide himself from the guards that stood watch outside the giant set of white doors that the Empire had failed to open. Two spotlights kept the giant set of doors illuminated, but outside that it was pitch black now with the sun having fallen behind the horizon.

Only two guards he could see, but they were armed with machine guns and full tactical gear.

He pulled out his HDD and checked them and the door. Everything around him was blackened to ash, still giving off ambient heat from the weapon's fire, and yet the door looked pristine. Unblemished. It was as impenetrable a barrier as the energy field overhead. He looked up, noted that the shield didn't seem to be influencing the ambient light any. It was just as dark as you'd expect it to be in the late evening with the overhead glow failing to reach the ground beneath it. Eerie.

If they'd gone to this great a length to open a door, then it was obvious they'd failed to enter whatever was behind it. Maybe that was why the energy field appeared overhead? A defense mechanism? No...

The explosion he'd heard was hours ago, the shield went up had happened prior to that. Strange. Were the two events even connected then?

He furled his brow with a frown, unsure of what was going on with little information to help him. Looking at the two tactical clad guards, Fox knew he wouldn't be able to take them both out to inspect the door. Even if he did, what could he do that the Empire wouldn't have already tried with their own resources? They'd even used an energy cannon on the door!

He sat back, flexing his hands on the handle of the artifact. He didn't know what to do with this thing but looking at it now he did feel it was strangely familiar. Flexing his grip again he had to wonder if it was just a staff. Had a big pointy end on one side, and a small pointy end at the other. Would the Krazoa have still used melee weapons if they were this advanced of a species?

Maybe it was ceremonial, but the weapon had the weight and felt strong enough in his hands to be a useful weapon if you knew how to use a staff. Guns and fists were more Fox's forte. Well, it did help him knock a pilot out cold, even if unintended. Maybe he could quietly knock out the gu-

"FOX MCCLOUD!" A booming voice echoed in his ears, doubling him over until his face hit the dirt, staggering him flat as his hands reached up to cup his ears as he winced in pain, gasping as his head throbbed like his head wanted to split in two.

<< Unknown Location, Planet Sauria >>

"If you do what I say, then I command you to close all the doors back!" Krystal shouted.

[Please Define Desired Gates To Close.] The voice replied.

"The ones they are trying to open!"

[The Gate ID Must Be Provided For Central Command To Perform This Task.]

Krystal shouted into the void, her frustration roaring back to life.

“Which GATE are they opening now! Tell me!”

[Insurgents Are Currently Breaching Gates 03C, 18E, 19E, And 47L.]

“Ok, then close those gates! Close Gate 03C!”

[Gate 0 3 C Is Presently Closed. Insurgents Will Breach The Gate In 32 Seconds.]

Was it dense? If she had her hands and hair, she'd be using the former to rip out the latter! They were forging access codes to breach the gates, then they had to wait 120 seconds for the code to be verified...

“Deny, stop the verification for access codes on Gate 03C!” She rephrased her command on a gamble. If it was true that she had to tell it to do everything, then she probably needed to be SPECIFIC with her requests.

[Verification Denied. Gate 03C Is Secure.] The voice replied, confirming her suspicion.

Triumph at last!

“Deny verification on Gates...” She couldn't remember the other gate IDs. “What are the other Gates? I can't remember them!”

The voice began to repeat the Gate numbers to her, and then right before her 'eyes' the IDs appeared in the void like translucent letters floating calmly in water.

“You can do that!” She asked.

[Rephrase Inquiry.]

“You can make words appear!”

[Interface With Central Command Supports All Manners Of Display Mediums. Text, Audio, Video Can All Be Provided Upon Request.]

“Show me the gates!”

Suddenly, three shimmering squares of light appeared before her, all adjacent to the floating text of numbers. The light of each square quickly faded to be replaced with vibrant color and Krystal then found herself watching surveillance footage of three teams working to force open the gates.

“I can’t hear them.” She said, “I want audio!”

[Affirmative.] The voice replied, and suddenly there was sound. She could hear the crews all talking amongst themselves, then one team cheered as the gate opened.

[Gate 19E Has Been Breached. A New Attempt To Breach Gate 03C Is Being Initiated.]

“No! Close Gate 19E! Lock it!” She shouted, panic overtaking her as she watched the soldiers on the screen begin to pick up their tech equipment.

[Closing Gate 19E.] And the gate began to shut again, forcing a soldier who’d already walked through to duck and roll under it to rejoin his companions.

“What was that! We just opened it!” One of them shouted.

“Did you fuck something up unhooking it?” Another asked, the third of the trio frustrated and confused.

“I don’t know, I unhooked it the same way I did the other three doors.”

“Well, shit, try it again.”

The three began to hook their equipment back up to a socket in the floor.

“Ok, good!” She said with relief, then looked at her list of gates. “Deny verification on gates 03C, 18E, and 47L!”

[Verification Denied On All Specified Gates. All Gates Secure.]

But even having stopped the gates from being forced open didn’t mean they couldn’t be opened again! The teams were already trying to forge new access codes to open the doors, and the voice began to read them off one by one, with the list of gates under siege only growing as Krystal began to understand just how many teams were dedicated to unlocking every door in the Stronghold. Every time she put a stop to one effort, another took its place. She wanted to say she couldn’t do this forever, but could she? Is this all she had the power to do?

If Dr Tappa had managed to call for help, then there would be help coming wouldn’t there?

“Is there a way we can call for help? The Krazoa? The Cornerian Army!” She had to ask.

[Central Command Sent Out A Distress Call When Stronghold Primea Went Into Containment. There Was No Response.]

“Shouldn’t they be upset that one of their planets is being invaded!”

[Central Command Has Not Detected A Master Signal In 3,462 Cycles. A Response Is Not Expected.]

These were ruins! Of course, it’d be thousands of cycles, or years, since the Krazoa were last in the Lylat System, if they were even still alive after all this time.

“What about the Cornerian Army! Dr Tappa was going to try and get out a call for help! They’d surely be coming if they got his message!”

[The Cornerian Army Does Not Match Any Known Entity. Please Define.]

“They- They’re a big military! They fought a war against them, the insurgents! The hostile people inside the stronghold are our enemies!”

[Central Command Requires Confirmation. 8 Cycles Ago Central Command Monitored A Large Scale Conflict In System. All Insurgents Within Stronghold Primea Participated In That Conflict?]

“Yes! They’re the bad guys!”

Several new video screens appeared before her, moving the previous screens to her periphery. In front of her were multiple views of numerous warships floating out in space.

[A Fleet Of Unknown Vessels Has Been In Orbit Around Primea For the Last Twelve Hours. Central Command Requires Confirmation. Is Their Designation ‘Cornerian Army’?]

Seeing the silver and white ships all lined up in formation filled her heart with hope and joy that could have brought her to tears had she had the eyes to shed them. There were so many of them! Dozens and dozens! It was just like the archival footage she’d seen from the war of the great fleet battles fought between Corneria and the Empire!

“Yes! We’re saved! They can come and fight for us!”

Finally, there was something to cheer about as she felt herself smile on the inside as she watched all those ships.

[Gates 03C, 18E, and 47L have been breached.]

“What!”

Oh, no, she’d forgotten! Had it really been two minutes?

“Show me the next gates, please!” She begged, and the video screens all began to shift around to place renewed focus on the teams working to breach the gates. There were now six teams working tirelessly.

[The Next Gates Expected To Be Breached Are 03D, 19E, 26B, and 40K.]

She'd have to watch those gates and not get distracted, but the fleet was just outside in orbit around the planet!

“Has the Army tried to do anything to help us?” She asked.

[The Cornerian Fleet Has Made Periodic Attempts To Breach The Planetary Defense Field Without Success.]

“What is that? What is the planetary defense field?” She asked as she focused her attention on the moving teams of soldiers with their equipment. She wasn't going to let them get any further.

[The Planetary Defense Field Is A Defensive Shield Surrounding Stronghold Primea. It Cannot Be Penetrated By Primitive Technology.]

“Show me.”

A new screen appeared that held the entire planet in focus with a shimmered layer of blue energy seemingly coating its surface. It really was a shield that surrounded all of Sauria!

“So, wait, the Army is outside that? They aren't coming down to help us?”

[Affirmative. The Cornerian Army Is Located Outside The Defense Field's Perimeter.]

“Can't we let them through?”

[Negative. Their Ships Do Not Possess The Phase Key Required.]

“What if we turn off the shield?”

She turned her attention back to the teams of soldiers. More teams were now setting up at their respective gates and she had to look back at the updated list of gates to know which ones to order shut first.

[Disengaging The Planetary Defense Field Has A High Probability Of Provoking Conflict. It Is Not Advised.]

“It's the Cornerian Army! They've got the guns to fight these guys! Look at how many there are!”

[The Cornerian Army Fleet Possesses 49 Warships Of Unidentified Make. The Insurgent Force On Primea Has 81 Warships Of Unidentified Make. The Cornerian Army Is Not Equipped To Repel The Insurgent Force. Their Odds Of Success Are Below 40%.]

Her heart sank. With an army a half size larger than theirs, how could they hope to beat them? One of the teams submitted a forged access code, and she gave the command to deny it. The voice replied, and she waited silently for the next breach attempt so she could deny it, too.

What could she do? What could anyone do?

If she ordered the shield to go down, then a war would start that the Cornerians couldn't win, right? That wouldn't help anyone! They needed a bigger army!

"Does the Stronghold have any weapons?"

[Negative. The Masters Removed Or Disabled All Stronghold Weapons Systems Prior To Departure. Only Defensive Mechanisms Remain.]

"But having a weapon is a defensive mechanism!" She shouted.

[There Are No Weapon Systems On Primea.]

And with that she had no idea what to do. What were her options? She commanded the voice to deny another gate's verification, and it complied. The crews were becoming visibly irritated on screen, which made her feel better, but only a little. Was this all she could do? Stop them from opening doors while a huge fleet of enemy ships sat outside somewhere waiting for their chance to destroy the saviors floating overhead? She had the power to start a war, but it'd be one they'd surely lose.

"Is there anything at all down here we can use?"

[Scans Indicate That One Fighter Craft Matching Cornerian Army Ship Design Landed On Primea Prior To Activation Of The Defense Field.]

Just one?

"Show me."

She felt dejected, disheartened, at a loss as to what to do. Only one space fighter? What could one pilot do against... everything, all of this? She felt like she was suffering from whiplash, hope and depression tugging her roughly back and forth until several of the video screens shifted aside to make room for a new screen. Centered in view was a lone pilot skulking through the darkness, weapon in hand. It looked like he was crawling through rock and debris.

“Who is that?” She asked. The screen began to zoom in on the figure until the ‘camera’ appeared to be only a few feet away from him before a thin line of white energy passed over the screen. As the line passed by the imagery brightened as if the camera had turned night into day, and she could now see the pilot’s face clearly.

[Central Command Has Monitored All Communications On Primea. The Subject In Focus Was Repeatedly Referred To As-]

“Fox McCloud!” She shouted, her heart lifting in her chest as a wellspring of emotion flooded up within her. Her childhood returned to her in a flash, the sight of four men on a brilliant stage, the famed General Pepper awarding each of them the highest medal Corneria could bestow upon a soldier.

Krystal knew this face, had been in Corneria City as the Empire savaged it, and survived to see the news reports. She’d followed the news of the war along with her parents, of their losses, of their victories, and of the infamous Star Fox Team. Of all the people to be here, of ALL the pilots who could stand a chance to do SOMETHING, it was this man!

[Affirmative. Subject’s Name Designation Is Fox.]

“Is there a way we can speak to him? To let him know what’s going on! We have to warn him!”

[Both Hostile And Allied Organics Are Using Too Primitive Of Communications Technology. Digital Communication Will Be Strained With Any Foreign Vessel Without Significant Adjustments To Their Equipment. Central Command Recommends Direct Link Communication With Subject Fox.]

“Didn’t you just say you were monitoring all communications?”

[Central Command’s Sensor Array Can Detect And Isolate All Audible Speech On Primea. Use Of Digital Communications Technology Is Not Required.]

“Ok, so what is direct link then? And deny verification on gate 40K!”

[Verification Denied. Direct Link Communication Is The Default Method For Navigators. Interim Navigator Krystal Is Not A Master So Direct Link Will Result In Cognitive Stress If Attempted.]

Cognitive stress? She wasn’t sure that she understood what that would mean for her, but what choice did she have if she had to communicate with him?

“How do I do that?”

[Due To Interim Navigator Krystal's Incompatibility The Process Must Be Simplified. Target Has Been Identified. Initiating Link.]

Something hit her, like a smothering weight that compressed her brain until she ached with a powerful migraine. For a moment she couldn't see, but as her vision returned the throbbing in her head grew louder. The screen before her that contained Fox McCloud took over, blocking out everything else until he was all she could see through blurred vision and ringing ears.

[You May Speak Freely.]

She shouted his name.