

becoming of an officer of her rank. With tremendous speed, she moved to the small closet. In under a minute she was leaving the housing unit in the black uniform worn by all members of Command Corps.

The command deck was also the functional CIC for operations system wide. It was bustling with activity and movement as the officers of the deck dropped the daily maintenance and activity to ready the stations for any contingency. The ceiling and the south wall slowly faded to black to highlight augmented reality readouts of the system. At the front of the room a 3-dimensional representation of the solar system dominated the wall. All the military assets of the system were highlighted in a blue color and the 14 enemy ships highlighted by red triangles.

With confidence Vice Commander Kahn walked onto the deck of the CIC. She moved with grace and purpose to the rectangular station hub in the middle of the room to join Quasar Rodriguez and General Okafor. Before reaching the station, she stopped and spoke to the officers on duty. “This is why we prepare people. Stay calm and work the problems. Quasar Rodriguez, what is the situation?”

PLUS 18 MINUTES
SPACE COMMAND QUASAR
VALERIE RODRIGUEZ
OGUN STATION, NUBIA
DISCOVERY

Quasar Rodriguez stood in the command position of the rectangular station hub in the center of the CIC on the command deck. The tabletop black smart glass ringed the rectangular table. It could form 14 individual stations and provide visual information to complement the information received straight to the brain of the officer that used the station from the CU. Quasar Rodriguez used the station at the head of the rectangular desk meant for the highest ranking officer on duty.

Rodriguez's lavender fingers plotted along the glassy surface organizing the starship deployment roster for the next month. Pink eyes scanned the reports providing the status of repairs on vessels that recently entered the system after an engagement outside the system. She sought an updated the for the eight starcarriers under construction at the Barca Saryards. Rodriguez was physically short with a petite body structure, but mentally she was a giant. Dark purple hair pushed the limits of length regulations would allow so she pulled it behind her ears to shorten its apparent length. It still touched the top of her dark grey Space Command uniform and she knew she would soon have to cut it soon but she was going to hold on to it as long as she could.

Each branch of the United Planets of Humanity Armed Forces was represented in the CIC. The east wall had 14 work stations with 7 along the wall and 7 facing the center of the room. The Logistics Corps and Orbital Guard branches both manned four of the stations while the remaining six were operated by Planetary Command.

The northern wall had 12 stations with 6 facing the wall and 6 facing the

center of the room all manned by Space Command. The west wall also had 14 stations and was a mirror image of the other side. That wall was operated by the Meteor Corps, Comet Corps, and Astro Corps. The Meteor and Comet Corps occupied 4 stations each while the Astro Corps manned the final 6.

Two doors to the main hallway bookended the 6 stations against the north while two doors lined the east and west wall after the 4th station along each wall respectfully. The middle of the room was dominated by a long rectangular workstation hub meant to be used by the command corps and the system commanders during combat situations. The east hallway led to a series of meeting rooms, areas, and advantaged communication centers. The west door led to the 16 onsite housing units used by the Command Corps and the systems generals and quasars.

Rodriguez fawned over the latest military starships that entered the system after a skirmish with Poveen forces 2 months prior. Three of the support starships were damaged in the conflict and the entire constellation bridged back for repairs. The UPHAF designated all military spacecraft stars. A collection of 1 to 20 stars form a constellation. A grouping of 1 to 5 constellations is considered a battle cluster. A supercluster consists of 3 to 5 battle clusters. 1 to 3 superclusters formed a battle group. 1 to 3 battle groups formed a numbered galaxy. Humanity was currently protected by 17 deep space numbered galaxies and 27 system galaxies.

She commanded the Nubian System Galaxy and all other space command units in the system. Rodriguez was trying to find a good reason to travel to Barca Staryards to get a tour of the new battlenovas. Memories of her first star commission, the Black Orca, filled her heart with warmth. It was a little spitfire of a craft. The starvette only had a crew of 8 but it was her crew and her starship. Her missions were mostly anti-piracy missions against thieves bent on stealing aquatic protein, the major export of her home system, Azteca. A small smile dawned her face until she realized that she was doing it, and then it faded.

Memory lane was cut short when the Orbital Guard officer that monitored the Einstein-Rosen gates noticed a problem. The two largest ER gates controlled by the military shut down without warning. The dark-skinned man tried to re-open the gates but his attempts failed. Quickly the officer performed a diagnostic when he noticed the 3rd, 4th, 5th....10th ER gate failed in the system. It took thirty seconds for all ER gates in the Nubian system to stop working. He rapidly passed the information to General Okafor via the military network.

Rodriguez was disappointed at first by the interruption. She hoped her time on duty occur without incident but that was now gone. When the details of the interruption came to her terminal she became nervous. General of the Logistics Corps Nakia Okafor received the information on

her terminal. Rodriguez saw the change in her demeanor and watched closer. She was the only other senior officer on the deck and stood to Rodriguez's left along the side of the rectangular command station. Okafor was almost a foot taller than Rodriguez and sometimes she felt like a child standing next to her. The yellow uniform of the Logistics Corps seemed to make her chocolate skin glow even brighter.

General Okafor turned to the officer that sent her the information and said, "What in the hell could do this? I need answers."

"Unknown Sir. We haven't detected any subspace or gravimetric anomalies. I don't know how to describe it. The best interpretation of the readings that I am getting is that space has become heavy or dense. With full power, we cannot make even create the smallest opening though space-time. The gates are working because we can register that the gates are pushing against space. They just aren't getting through. All system techs and system scientists have been called to duty. Sir, it is almost as if space itself is fighting back against the ER gates and bridges," he said to his commander.

General Okafor responded, "We have a Sit 1, and an all stations priority. We have complete disruption of our ER gates and bridges. We need all ships capable of creating an ER bridge to attempt a jump. If the jump is successful, relay the information to me. Any gravimetric or subspace anomalies that you detect please relay to Ogun Station. Repeat this is a Sit 1," said General Nakia Okafor.

Sit 1, short for a class 1 situation, demanded all personnel in the CIC to prioritize the command given. Without the order her request would be placed in a queue and they didn't have time for that. The Nubian system was a major exporter of food and raw materials. Any delay could cost the planet billions of credits. Okafor, like most the Logistics Corps, were from Nubia, Kush, Carthage, or the moons of Atlanta in Nubian system. They cared deeply for the wellbeing of the system and took great pride in its success.

Rodriguez sent a message to Okafor through the military network on a private channel using only her thoughts. Her florescent pink eyes locked with the large brown eyes of Okafor as the channel opened.

"What the fuck can shut down all ER gates and bridges in a system? I have been in space my entire career and I have seen anything do that before," said Rodriguez via the channel.

"I have no idea. I don't even have a guess. The readings are like he says. Space is heavy. Space is thick. It is like space-time went from the thickness of a piece of paper, easily punctured by our ER gates and bridges, to 3-meter-thick block of steel. The readings don't make sense at all but we will figure it out. Give us time," Okafor replied as she turned her eyes down to the console.

“Okay, I will search to see if anything like this has been recorded before,” said Rodriguez. She quickly toggled and searched for more incidents like this that may have occurred. Her search found only 4 incidents and they all happened in nebulas or close to black holes. The space in the Nubian system was as normal as space was. The Nubian sun was three times larger than the sun in the Sol system, but it could never produce the effects on space-time that had caused the previous events on record.

Rodriguez had faith in Okafor. The general was one of those women that you are jealous of because they are so successful. You grow to hate them from afar but once you meet them you can only wish them the best. To the male officers she was one of the guys, and to the female officers she was motherly. General Okafor also had more respect from the male officers because she entered the service once she applied, like they had to. The woman had five children and only 2 years left on her 50-year commitment to armed service. She had to juggle the life of a parent and an officer which Rodriguez didn't and many other female officers didn't have to. She could relate to the challenges of the male officers under her command and that was something Rodriguez wished she could do.

Quasar Rodriguez walked to stand next to Okafor and gave her audible encouragement. At the end of the one-on-one talk she engaged the rest of the room the same way. Quasar Rodriguez was the type of officer that was tough but extremely fair. She was open enough that any officer from any branch could bring a problem to the forefront with the knowledge that they would get rewarded for the presentation of bad news if they had solution to fix it, rather than being forced to conceal problems until they became large and unforgiving for an easy solution.

One by one along the north wall of the command center the 12 Space Command officers in the dark gray uniforms completed the last of the weekly tasks assigned to them. Each terminal on the command deck was supported by at least ten stations and officers elsewhere in the building. The officers sorted and pushed only relevant information up to the higher stations to prevent information overload. The sentry 7 operations station then exploded with information. The light from the Poveen incursion reached the first sentry 7 unit. He quickly sorted the information and sent the data packet to the console of Rodriguez and Okafor.

Ten thousand S-C100 units, nicknamed S7s, littered the system in a comprehensive detection disc. The United Planets of Humanity Armed Forces deployed the sentry 7 advanced detection grid in the Nubian System five years ago. The S7 units were autonomous installations roughly equal distant from each other around the system. Each unit was 40 meters tip to tip vertically and horizontally. The unit took the appearance of two pyramids attached at each base. The design, carbon composite hull, and

subspace dampening field made the units extremely hard to detect and destroy. With both passive and active sensor systems, the S7 units provided the ability to observe the entire system with minimal light lag providing an almost real-time assessment.

Every S7 unit has a standard EM communications suite if necessary, but the true value of the S7 is the quantum entanglement communication technology. The S7s can communicate real time with Ogun Station. This breaks the reliance on speed of communications. The only drawback of the system is the corresponding sister units that need to be housed on the planet for each S7 unit needs and equally sized “sister” unit on Ogun Station for the system to work. The communication center of Ogun Station is extensive. It currently housed 10 thousand sister units, 500 backup S7s and sister units, 25 space station units, and 100 ship units. In total the communication units, corresponding power plant, and computer system capable of making sense of it all encompassed 6.5 million sq meters.

The massive investment in credits and material paid off. Without the detection grid, the light from the ER bridge creation and reflected off the hulls of the Poveen cruisers would take seven hours to travel the 53 AU to the CIC on Nubia. Critical time that they needed to determine the intent of the Alien craft now in the system.

Quasar Rodriguez looked up from her console at the General Okafor. Suddenly Rodriguez didn't feel well as the sudden rush of adrenaline and emotion flooded her body. The two officers traded private messages to each other discussing the implications of the alien actions while they waited for verification of the Poveen incursion from a second sentry 7 unit. Time seemed to stop on the bridge and it was so quiet that you could hear every person breathe.

Rodriguez suddenly remembered a random memory from her childhood when she waited for ice cream. Her mother seemed to take her sweet time one day after the family went swimming in the planet-wide ocean. She annoyed her mother so much that she never received the ice cream because she got herself grounded. She snickered at the memory and the awkward way the human mind works.

The CIC came back to life when the light from the incursion reached more S7 units. The sensor operators easily verified the 14 Poveen cruisers in the system. Rodriguez started to prep for combat and locate any spaceships in the area. The Poveen are known to perform hit and run missions on installations with valuable resources. Recently human forces have begun to provide more and more resistance to the Poveen cruisers and other Poveen aggression. Rodriguez felt confident that they could do the same here in the system.

While Rodriguez prepped the system for combat General Okafor quickly cross referenced the Poveen incursion to occur .122 seconds before

all the ER gates and bridges stopped working in the system. Okafor relayed the information to Rodriguez. The women nodded to each other and triggered a yellow alert. At first the duo thought the thickening of space was a natural disaster but now they believed it to be an interdictor system. Rodriguez, the veteran of over thirty space battles, understood the implications immediately. Human spacecraft could not use ER bridge drives to reposition around the Nubian system. Any battle would be fought without the aid of that tactical ability.

Space Command officers stood from the chairs they worked from as the work stations rose when the yellow alert activated. The chairs retracted into the floor as the officers welcomed the rising consoles to the standing position. The rest of the room turned to look at the Space Command officers as the team worked frantically trading information both verbally and via network. An officer of the Comet Corps along the west wall that didn't receive the information of the incursion by the Poveen yet said what the rest of room was thinking, "This can't be good."

Rodriguez briefed the entire CIC with the information after the yellow alert sounded. The current problem was almost all the military stars in the system were located around Nubia or Carthage. Normally those stars would bridge into fighting positions close to the Poveen cruisers and intercept. Currently they would have to fire engines and burn to the meet the enemy force. Rodriguez sent a request to all the branches that operated in space to provide information on the deployment options without the bridges and gates.

Quasar Rodriguez requested Vice Commander Kahn return to the CIC via network connection. In the time that it took Kahn to reach the CIC deck Rodriguez and Okafor had compiled deployment information and shared the initial report. Vice Commander Kahn walked onto the deck with focus and determination. Rodriguez loved the confidence and power that she showed. Kahn always commanded the attention of the room and that was an aspect of Kahn that Rodriguez tried to mimic.

"Space Command, I need you forecast possible vectors of approach and get me up to date on the movements of that constellation. Interrupt me if necessary, I need to know who is in danger and what they are doing. Also, I need to know what assets we can deploy quickly. Thirdly, provide a threat assessment of the enemy constellation and the force needed for overwhelming victory.

Logistics and Orbital Guard, find out why our damn gates and bridges are not working. If you can't figure it out I know scientists from the university that can help. Acquire them if you need to. Start the process of identifying if any commercial starcraft are along the Poveen vectors, update Space Command and me when it is completed," said Vice Commander Kahn as she walked on the deck. The confident officer walked over and

stood next to Rodriquez at the console after speaking to the officers on the deck.

“Sir, sentry 7 is reading a tremendous electromagnetic radiation coming from the cruisers, but that can’t explain the loss of Einstein-Rosen capabilities. The EM effect coming from the cruisers are just localized jamming of our EM transmissions. If they are disrupting the ER gates I fear they may be operating in an area of science, math, and physics that we have yet to obtain. I am starting the process to acquire the scientists needed to assist with the problem,” said Quasar Rodriguez as she passed the information via network to the commander while it simultaneously updated the main projector on the deck of the CIC.

“Quasar Rodriguez, pass the ER problem to General Okafor. Continue to monitor the enemy constellation and ready your stars to engage in combat. We don’t have to solve that problem right now but we do have to solve the 14 Poveen cruisers in my system. General Okafor, I don’t need you to solve the problem of heavy space, but I will settle for a method to block the effect of the interdicator tech. Can we do that?”

“Sir, I can’t even detect the technology. It’s currently either too advanced or it operates outside of normal detection systems. I recommend that we bring online Orunmila to give us solutions for detecting the interdicator technology and a possible method to defeat it,” said General Okafor as she stood stoic next to the main console.

Orunmila was the Nubian System artificial intelligence program. It was commissioned shortly after the Nubian System joined the United Planets of Humanity, named after the ancient African Orisha of wisdom, knowledge, and divination. The AI, once fully activated, used predictive analytics to determine outcomes from decisions made by commanders. It could evaluate decisions before they were implemented and provide courses of action for the leadership team. AI of the size and power of Orunmila were illegal without a permit and it was the reason why AI were left dormant unless a need arose.

“Understood, keep trying to figure out what is interfering with the ER gates. In the meantime, tell the corporations that we are aware of the problem and we are working on solutions now. Secondly...” said Kahn before she was interrupted by the Quasar Rodriguez.

“Sorry for the interruption sir but we have activity. The constellation has split up. Three of the vessels have increased speed and are moving toward Carthage. Another three vessels have vectored toward the Atlanta planetary system. Three more have vectored and accelerated toward Kush. Four continue on the original vector toward Nubia and one cruiser has come to a complete stop in the black,” reported the Quasar Rodriguez.

Vice Commander Kahn sucked her teeth as the holographic map of the system updated the path of the Poveen cruisers. They are now vectored to

engage the 4 largest population and economic centers in the system. Rodriquez could not understand why the force separated and vectored the way they did, because those planetary systems were heavily defended and the approaching force would not survive an engagement.

“That can’t be it. Something is at play here,” Rodriquez said out loud on the deck to no one in particular as her thoughts escaped into the world.

“What? What do you mean that is not it?” asked Kahn.

“Something more is at play here. Do you really think the Poveen would show tech like this and only send 14 cruisers? Something is at play here and I don’t know what it is. Vice Commander, you taught early space battles. You know better than anyone that the race with the better tech always uses it to defeat the race with the lower tech in space. Well, they are not just showing better tech, they are flaunting it in our face,” said Rodriquez as she looked almost eye to eye with Kahn. Kahn processed that bit of information quickly and reacted.

“Command deck prepare to execute Protocol 1. Ping your station when you are ready to execute,” said the commander as she stared defiantly at the 3D display of the system in contemplation on the repercussions of her decision. The data was clear in her mind. The Poveen entered the system with hostile intentions and she was going to give people of the system as much time as possible to defend themselves.

This was Rodriquez’s third Protocol 1 since she was stationed in the Nubian system. All three times it was due to a Poveen incursion. The pings from the various stations and operations confirmed that preparations were nearing completion around the CIC. The command deck was eerily silent as the last station pinged for readiness. Vice Commander Priyanka Kahn gave the command to execute Protocol 1.

The protocol system was created during the Great Push Era after first contact. It is a system designed to provide a threat assessment and then apply the appropriate response. Protocol 1 is triggered when hostilities with an alien race are imminent. The actions of the previous 15 minutes indicated that those conditions existed.

Protocol 1 recalls all active duty officers and soldiers within 12 hours to report. It allows the military to take over the system-wide internet, holonet, and communication channels. Any corporate asset that is vital to the defense of the system can be conscripted. It also places the military leadership of the system in control over all military assets in the system and over the civilian government.

“Ops, what is our current readiness?”

“We estimate all forces will reach 100% readiness in 14 hours. Sir, we have been contacted by the civilian government and the representatives from the major corporations. They want to know why we are in Protocol 1 and they are reporting malfunctions in ER gates. How do you want me to

respond?”

“Set the briefing time for the corporations and government for 04:00. Logistics command, send craft to the homes or current locations of the command staff if they are more than fifteen kilometers from Ogun Station. Work the problem people. Your lives and the lives of your family may depend on it. Quasar Rodriguez, you have the deck until I return,” said Kahn as Rodriguez was updated on the timing of the cruisers.

“Sir, the cruisers have stopped accelerating. They are all set to arrive in 95 hours and 45 minutes give or take a minute or so,” explained Rodriguez. Kahn nodded and then the Vice Commander walked back into the private unit down the hallway from the command deck to communicate with Lord Commander Malcom Masters and change into the battle dress.

PLUS 20 MINUTES
COMMAND CORPS LORD COMMANDER
MALCOM MASTERS
TITUN LEGOS, NUBIA
MARCH OF THE KLAXON

The klaxon jarred him from a needed deep sleep. The sudden rush to consciousness disoriented the usually calm and focused commander. A couple of seconds passed before his brain could let go of the vivid dream of Masters battling an alien with his bare hands. The klaxon marched his brain to clarity. It marched with the steady and unrelenting purpose to activate the Lord Commander to action. It marched defiantly into his subconscious and conscious mind without permission to do so. It marched because the Nubian system needed it to march. It marched to signify the importance of the moment and the need for Masters to get his ass out of bed.

Masters leaned forward in the bed and wiped his eyes. He silenced the klaxon with a thought and toggled the alarm to the visual setting only. This action placed a flashing red bar in the bottom right of his line of sight as to not obstruct his movement. The floor was cool to the touch. He stood facing floor to ceiling glass. The amazing view from the four story penthouse showed the bustling coastal city of Titun Legos. Masters arrived at the glass section of the room and moved a portion to side with a simple command from his mind to provide access to the balcony.

Once on the balcony the glass wall retracted. Masters turned to look back at his sleeping wife to ensure he did not wake her with his movements. A torrent of information flooded his mind the second a connection was made with the military network. "Okay, this is not a drill," he thought. With the precision of a computer his brain processed the information and categorized the items that he thought were the most important. Masters walked down the timeline of events that occurred over the proceeding 20

minutes. A pending request for communication flickered into his field of vision and he quickly accepted the communication.

Masters' avatar appeared inside of Vice Commander Kahn's command unit. His avatar appeared in the black uniform of the Command Corps while his real mocha-skinned body stood naked on the balcony.

"Lord Commander Masters," greeted Kahn.

"Vice Commander Kahn. It looks like you are having one hell of an evening. I have reviewed your initial report. What is your assessment of the current situation? What do you think the Poveen are doing?" asked Masters. The report was just facts. Masters wanted some insight on the discussions occurring on the CIC. He needed to know what assumptions were being made to ensure his officers operated under the same information that he held.

Khan knew her commander well. She was going to provide the evidence that she had and some of the top line conclusions. Masters does not like assumptions not based on fact. This was beaten into his commanding officers daily and she was going to present the facts as she knew them with her conclusions with confidence.

"Commander, I have noticed 3 areas of note. The first area is the Poveen formation. The Poveen entered the system in a standard formation. Alien constellations usually maneuver in formations of seven stars and currently 14 ships have entered the system so that is not unusual. What is unusual is the fact that they split into 5 separate constellations on separate vectors. In the 127 engagements with the Poveen they have never displayed an action like this.

The area of note is the interdiction field. We have lost the ability to use every ER bridge and gate in the system. Our forces are limited to push propulsion only. The interdicator technology limits our ability to react quickly and to consolidate forces at speed. It also limits some of our weapon systems and the functionality of our devices. If we are not able to counter the interdicator field, we will be at a disadvantage to the Poveen. Currently the sentry 7 system has not been compromised by the interdicator field.

The third area of note is the Poveen tactics and strategy. The incursion into our system displays tactics we have not encountered before and the usage of new offensive technology presents a fundamental challenge. We face a dilemma. Is the interdicator field the only use of new technology or will they continue to use more advanced technology during this engagement? We need to show patience of movement and action if we are going to determine the extent of the technology they hold. If we rush we could make a tremendous mistake," said Vice Commander Kahn.

Kahn made sure not to include any emotion in the response, only assumptions based on fact. Over the course of his studies of military

combat with alien races, an overwhelming majority of military defeats could be attributed to false assumptions and the lack emotional control. Kahn knew this was how he thought because she was the one who taught him. Masters was once her student at the military college and started active duty 13 years before she did. They used to battle in class daily. Masters would sit in the middle seat of the front row and come into class seemingly ready to fight every day. That is why she trusted him now to make the right decision. She didn't trust him because she taught him. Kahn trusted him because she knew the man and his relentless work ethic.

“Thank you for your assessment Vice Commander Kahn. But, what do you think? I know I pounded it into your head and the rest of the team to not make assumptions not born by fact, but if theories are floating around in the CIC, I would like to hear them. Do any historical battles parallel this one? What could be the reason for them to break doctrine? We need to get inside the heads of these Poveen. We need to know why,” said Masters. The statement settled Kahn. The rigid commander rarely broke his protocol but this event was different than other incursions. This small change informed Kahn of the greater truth that he was feeling the same anxiety that the rest of the CIC was.

“Sir, to tell you the truth I am terrified of the unknown. I assume that the use of new tactics and equipment means they will have a new set of goals to accomplish. Also, the usage of this level of technology probably means this operation is a fully functioned and supported engagement by the Poveen government or a large Poveen faction. I assume that as we engage the enemy they will continue to bring forth new abilities and tactics. I assume that we will be tested to an extent that we have never been tested before. I assume that we will shortly have to order people to die. I assume all of this because the only other logical explanation is that 14 Poveen cruisers are engaged on a suicide mission with one of the most advantaged interdicator technologies we have encountered and that doesn't square with me. What say you? Are you troubled?” probed Kahn.

“Vice Commander Kahn I have come to a similar conclusion. We have never been able to bridge or jump into Poveen space and this technology may be the reason why. We must keep our wits about us and stay focused on the task at hand. We can't let our emotions cloud our judgement or let assumption creep distort reality. We will not fail those that depend on us. I just noticed that your shift ended. How much longer can you go before you need to sleep? Do you need to sleep now?” asked her commanding officer.

“No sir, I just took stims. I can give you another ten hours before my body gives out. That should be enough time for the entire command staff to be on deck. We have dispatched a transport to your location and to the location of other high ranking officers that are away from the Ogun region. The bird is ten minutes out. Do you need anything else from me? If not, I

will get back to the CIC.” said Kahn. Masters informed her that he would speak to her again once he reviewed the information further or upon arrival at Ogun Station.

Malcom Masters was a mountain of a man. He stood a little over 2 meters in height. The product of both the muscle and bone density augmentation and the enhanced strength and power augmentation. He weighed four hundred and fifty pounds with roughly 2 percent body fat. His muscles rippled under the skin and they flexed with the slightest movement. Masters had a top running speed of seventy kilometers per hour and could jump 15 meters in the air unaided by technology. This was the brand of soldier the Meteor Corps produced.

Masters didn't have to receive the life extension augmentation. His mother was born with the augmentation and his father received it without needing to commit to the military at 18 from the United Planets of Humanity Science Authority because he tested extremely high in mathematics. It was now common in the Human Sphere that anyone that placed in the top five percent in their age group in one of the nine intelligences receive the life extension augmentation.

Augmentation is not limitless. Human DNA can only change slightly before it breaks down and causes massive deformity and death. An augmentation scale was created to rate the degree of change. When an individual reaches a score of 100 they are banned from more augmentation. This stops over-augmentation and provides safeguards against abuse. Masters, unlike other recruits, was born with the life extension augmentation and didn't take the 40 Aug points hit that most recruits take when they join the service.

The strength and power augmentation and the density augmentation required by the Meteor Corps only used 50 Aug points combined. The usual soldier with a life extension augmentation would have reached 90 and stopped. Masters had the unique ability to add more minor augmentations to make him a better soldier. He added hyper-mental processing, enhanced sensory and perception, and advanced recovery. Almost immediately upon entering the corps he was fast tracked into special operations command and spent his entire career in that division before he was offered an officer commission in the Command Corps.

Masters took a deep breath of the humid Nubia air and felt the warmth on his skin. Everything looked so peaceful from that height and the city in general bustled with excitement and energy. He loved the city of Titun Legos and couldn't wait until he could enjoy it free of his military commitment. Wonderful beaches, elite restaurants, and cultural activities provided the ultimate backdrop to Nubia living. It could be weeks before he returned home so he stood watching the nightlife and absorbing the energy radiating from the city.

Soft ebony hands wrapped around his waist. His wife woke up and walked behind her husband while he engaged in the conversation with Kahn. The intoxicating smell of her perfume relaxed the warrior. Her long black curly hair gently brushed against his back as she gently placed her head against his back between the shoulder blades. She squeezed him as hard as she could. She didn't know if he was having another nightmare, taking a quick stroll, or if he was called to duty.

"Another test? Could they schedule one of these things when you are on duty. This is the fourth one in last fifteen days you have off. I wonder if they suspect something. Why do they always have to take you from me when you are home? This is not fair. I don't like losing days with you. I hate it," said Layla Light-Masters, as she held him tighter probing for the answer of why he was awake.

"Layla, you know I love you, right? I love the boys and I love our daughters. I love this place. I love all that we have become. I love our life," he said while he continued to look out over the city.

The first crackle of energy shook his wife. The second and third crackles shook the people below in the city but it was something he was waiting for. The man-made thunder boomed and echoed in the caverns created by the skyscrapers. Energy powered into the massive shield generator as the top of the energy projector breached the surface of the water 5 kilometers out in the ocean. Layla walked around his massive muscle-bound body and looked to the Southern Ocean.

"Shit. Is this real? How bad is it? Tell me," she said as the implications of shield activation set in.

"We are in Protocol 1. The public will be notified shortly. Poveen are in the system. Currently we are trying to retrieve our forces and deploy police before panic sets in. I am leaving and I do not know when I will be back. I need you to go to the base. I need you under the same shield that I am under. Can you do this for me? I need to know that you are safe," he said in the calmest voice that he could.

"What? What is happening? Tell me now! Oh, my universe. What is going on? This can't be happening," Layla said to her husband as she turned to him on the balcony. Her outburst was interrupted when he pulled her close to his body. She fought his embrace for a second but then settled on his chest as tears fell from her eyes onto his skin. The last time Masters was engaged in a Protocol engagement he almost died. Memories of that engagement now haunt his memories and hers.

"We are under attack. I am sure your family will be contacted shortly if they don't know already. We will need their support in controlling the corporate delegation. Can you reach out to your father and uncle to make sure that happens? If this escalates to a P2 or P3, I will need to know the machinations of the political and corporate class don't undermine my

commands. I love you. I love them. I don't want us to be on different sides like I was with the corporate interests at the Battle of Butcher Bay," he said to her.

He leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. Two pleading green eyes looked up at him and he struggled not to give in to the plea. He opened the silk white and gold night gown to run his hands along the soft skin of her hips and stomach. Long powerful arms cup her butt forcing her to her tippy toes and a kiss. This pressed her skin against his. Masters was tempted to savor the moment as the countdown until the transport's arrival ticked down. If they hadn't made love three times in the last ten hours he would have made the request, but even heavily augmented humans still had limitations.

"I promise not to do anything stupid if you promise not to do anything stupid," said his wife. Masters nodded in agreement. It wasn't like he was going strap himself to a Caladbolg rocket while it burned at 25 gs only to jump off a thousand feet from the ground watching it impact an enemy formation and then land in the ashes of the impact firing on the enemy, like he did at the Battle of Butch Bay. He was 85 now and that was something reserved for irresponsible people in the 60s.

Layla assured governmental assistance however she could. Due to the political implications of enacting a Protocol 1 his wife understood the seriousness. Her family, the wealthiest on the planet, could have valuable assets seized by the Lord Commander at any time to help with the war effort. The importance of the marriage between Malcom Masters and Layla Light 48 years prior could not have been anticipated. Many planets have tremendous conflict between the military and the corporate elites. In the Nubian system this is different, due to the personal relationship Masters had forged with Layla's father, uncles, and grandparents. They have steered the system away from the usual political strife and setbacks because the sides respected and cared for each other on a personal basis. On the flip side, the two opposing parties have grown because of the relationship of the Masters and Light families. Masters needed to keep a close eye on those factions without having to worry about being attacked from behind by his own family by marriage.

Unwantingly, he moved from the warm embrace of his wife into the massive penthouse master suite. The immense closet doors opened from an apparent solid white wall to present his clothing and the black uniform of the Command Corps. Masters grabbed a large go bag. After one last kiss, he moved swiftly to the landing pad on the roof of the building.

PLUS 30 MINUTES
COMMAND CORPS SUB COMMANDER
MIKE RODGERS
JOHNSON BAY CITY, NUBIA
LAST CALL

300 kilometers to the south of Ogun Station, Sub Commander Mike Rodgers drank away the evening with his lovely fiancé. Rodgers just turned 175 standard Earth years old a couple of standard earth days prior but Mike insisted that he party the entire 44 hours of the Nubia day. One of the most decorated soldiers in the history of the United Planets of Humanity Armed Forces could party however he felt, thought the crafty officer. He served in one capacity or another in the seven major engagements with an alien species.

The outdoor bar was lively. A local reggae band played the smooth relaxing brand of reggae that dominated this area of Nubia. Rodgers, a native of Houston, heard exclusively the variants of country music as a child. Country pop, country jazz, country hip-hop, and country blues dominated the scene on his planet. Over the course of his military career he listened to a lot of music, but the music on Nubia was truly unique to him.

The bar was filled with local marine scientists, biologists, and other people associated with the task of populating the oceans of Nubia. Rodgers grew up on a similar planet, which is the reason why he bought a condo off-base in Johnson Bay City. The local economy was based on the growth of marine animals planet-wide in the Nubia oceans. The people of Johnson Bay City wore light clothing in the hot humid environment.

Rodgers was born on the moon Houston, orbiting the gas giant Texas, in the American system at the turn of the 25th century. Pectoral muscles

poked out of the open white linen shirt as his biceps tested the very limits of the sleeves. Massive thighs protruded from blue flower printed board shorts. A pair of brown sandals that had seen better days balanced the 7-foot-tall man on the stool. Though he had been in the sun all day his olive skin didn't burn, something he told his fiancé on more than one occasion.

Laura Oban, soon to be Laura Oban-Rodgers, sat across the elevated bamboo wooden table. Though not as large as Rodgers, Oban was slightly over two meters tall, with the clear markings of military augmentations. Her orange skin glowed in the Caribbean-themed bar light. Short blue hair and piercing blue eyes highlighted her angular face and full lips. Though muscular, she maintained a womanly shape.

Oban is a protocol 5 human. The alien race known as the Lovick invaded human space 36 years ago. The conflict was the product of a Lovick Lord's insistence that Humanity owed it a solar system, as payment for not asking permission to settle close to Lovick space. Humanity lost 6.8 billion people in the conflict and Lovick lost 1 starship. Humanity, which was understood after the conflict, was not equipped to fight any alien species it encountered. It could be eradicated if the Lovick wanted it so. Losing a prospecting ship or a lone spacecraft to aliens was one thing, but when three alien craft ER bridged into a system and destroy all human life in that system in a matter of three hours, the calculus for survival shifted. Humans also can't forget about the colossal defeat when the 3rd and the 6th Galaxies ER bridged into the system only be rendered to atoms.

When a Protocol 5 is engaged, the United Planets of Humanity Armed Forces trigger a force replacement plan. Every soldier that enters the armed services provides sperm or egg samples to ensure that they can have children if they are exposed to radiation in space or if they lose the ability due to injury. During protocol 5, a subset of the preserved material is used to create replacement soldiers. Three types of soldiers are created.

The first batch of soldiers are rapidly aged so that they can begin reinforcing human ranks after 3 years, but they only have a 30-year life span. Another group is aged a little slower and they are ready to fight in 7 years and have a life span of 80 to 90 years. The third group grow normally and have a normal life span of a human. Oban is a 3rd wave Protocol 5 human. Three hundred million soldiers like her were created at the end of Lovick incursion. They are required to serve until the age of 40 years but must stay in the reserves until they are 100.

Oban was born with double the augmentation that Rodgers had implanted currently. The only non-military augmentation was the "beauty" augmentation. It was extremely difficult to tell the difference between female and male P5's when they were first created. Public outcry and an extremely high suicide rate from the female soldiers forced the military to develop an augmentation. The augmentation gave the P5 women a more

feminine appearance. Rodgers would argue the augmentation worked beyond expectations and now, even though Laura Oban was muscle-bound, she had an extremely attractive body and figure.

Rodgers had 3 years and Oban 5 years left on the commitment to the military. After the service, they planned on buying a spacecraft and travelling the human sphere visiting every human system. Mike's long service, frugal lifestyle, and investments provided a mighty nest egg.

Until Rodgers retires from the service they both planned to live a comfortable lie. Laura Oban told her fiancé that she wasn't a high-ranking soldier and he accepted that explanation on the surface. The Sub Commander once searched for her profile in the military data base and couldn't find it. That meant she was special forces, Dragon corps, or Mantis Corps. If that was true, she would be court-martialed for telling anyone her identity. Rodgers feared that one day she would be called to an assignment and never return. That is what happened to special operations forces all the time and P5s received the most dangerous missions. Rodgers understood she was violating the rules because she was involved with a commanding officer, but he was not breaking the rules because she wasn't technically under his command.

Rodgers made Oban feel like a human for the first time. She was born as a tool of war, completely expendable. The love and affection from Rodgers was the first real human thing she had known. She had no family and her only friends were other P5s. Oban was the first person that Rodgers loved in over 50 years since he lost a wife and two children. She pulled him out of downward spiral of drinking and carrying on. They both needed each other and the United Planets of Humanity Armed Forces was not going to take that from either of them.

Laura Oban signaled her fiancé that she needed something else from him without making a sound. She seductively licked around her straw then sliding it up and down while peering into his eyes. Under the table her foot found freedom from the sandal on a mission. It slowly crept up his leg until it found the target of the mission. Rodgers was not opposed to a little game footsie and the actions that usually followed it.

"Don't start something you can't finish," said Rodgers.

"I finish what I start. Besides you have been drinking all night. Are you sure it is going to work? I am ready to start now if you are," replied Oban as she seductively looked at Rodgers. He nodded his head in agreement to the start time and dismissed the working comment with a smile and laugh. Eager to receive his birthday present, Rodgers looked down at his drink to size it up. The man smiled and quickly connected into the bar account and paid the bill via the network. The popular peach beer was quickly chugged from the large glass mug. Rodgers stood from the table visibly excited from the foreplay, though he tried to hide it with his shirt.

The protocol 1 klaxon jolted both from continuing. Over the military network top military officials were updated on the incursion of Poveen forces into the Nubian System. It was common for soldiers to cut off the active military feeds during personal time but the Protocol 1 klaxon didn't care. Sub Commander Rodgers triggered his implant to run a pre-selected program that prioritized the events since he cut off the feed. It also triggered the nanobots in his blood to start removing the alcohol from his system. The klaxon was silenced and placed in the bottom right of his vision. A message from Vice Commander Kahn popped in his main view. It was a brief thirty second general message telling anyone that heard the message that birds are in the air to their locations for extraction.

The information from the events of the past thirty minutes stripped the joy from his celebration. Rodgers knew the Poveen and he hated them. To date the Poveen killed 2,135,321 soldiers he commanded into battle. Not as powerful as the Lovick, the Poveen were still superior to the humans. Rodgers checked the timer that populated the lower right of his visual HUD created by the CU implant. It provided the landing locations of the transport and the time it was expected to arrive.

"Do you think this is a drill or this is real?" asked Oban.

"Hard to say. A lot of information on this one. Most drills don't have this much depth to them. I guess we will find out shortly," responded Rodgers as he questioned why she knew what was happening too. Did she receive the message too? Was the klaxon sounding off in her head as well? He hoped she was just reacting to his movements and actions.

The bird was eleven minutes out and he had to travel a short distance to get to it. Rodgers grabbed Oban's hand and walked to the taxi that he called. The door opened and the two of them jumped inside the spacious taxi. The network prioritized the taxi by passing the queues that would normal plague this area of Johnson City. The estimated trip time was five minutes. Oban looked at Rodgers and asked him if that was enough time. Though Rodgers had shifted focus from romance to duty quickly, his fiancé hadn't. Rodgers wanted to dismiss the advance to prepare but when she started to undress he couldn't resist. Oban wasn't going to let the last moments of that wonderful day be spent gazing into nothingness sorting data files.

With one minute to spare the couple finished a passion-filled moment and put back on the clothing that was discarded recklessly. The large moon seemed to hang over the beach with its full reflection on the water. Rodgers couldn't help but think how beautiful Nubia was. It still wasn't better than Houston though and nothing ever would be in his mind, but it was nice. Men and women of the armed services approached from all angles toward the extraction point. An early extraction like this one was mostly high level officers only. Commanders, generals, admirals, quasars,

colonels, and other high level officers would be retrieved before lower level officers.

Oban turned to Sub Commander Rodgers and said, "I have been activated. I hope this turns out to be nothing but it's realistic that we won't see each other for a while. Mike, I love you, remember that. If this escalates to a Protocol 2, and Orunmila is activated, there is a chance that our relationship will be exposed," she said with a calm but somber face. Rodgers turned and gave her a big smile.

"Laura, I don't give a fuck who finds out or what they do to us. When this is over we are getting married and that it that. Sparkle it is time for me to go. Take care," he said in a stern and unapologetic voice. Every minute more officers arrived to the beach. The same scene that played out in the taxi was playing out on foot, in taxis, or personal vehicles. It was time to say goodbye. Husbands kissed wives, wives kissed husbands, and they both kissed children.

Rodgers looked at the timer. The ship was two minutes out. Rodgers stepped out of the taxi as Oban cried from both eyes. He couldn't understand why as he tried to comfort her. This wasn't his first time leaving a woman he loved to go fight and he knew that once he left she would get it together and meet whatever transport would come for her in the coming hours. He was surprised when Oban followed him out of the taxi. He looked slightly angry. "What are you doing?" asked the Sub Commander. Rodgers wiped the tears from her eyes with his thumbs face but she repeated herself.

"I have been activated. I am required to be on that transport too," explained Oban. The words hung in the air even though the weight of the comment was heavy. She wasn't just a member of a secret team. She was either the commanding or extremely high ranking officer. Rodgers looked stunned and then his face turned stoic and nodded to her. He could no longer hide the fact that he didn't know that she was under his command. The lie of omission was now a lie of fact.

"Get out the taxi soldier, we don't have much time," he said to her as another officer walked by the taxi. Oban understood and stepped from the vehicle. Together they walked to the extraction point. The officers saluted the Sub Commander as he approached. The other officers looked at Oban confused. No doubt each one queried her identity and rank and they all received the "classified" designation on the HUD. Everyone knew each other but they didn't know who she was. One officer walked over and introduced himself to her. Oban stood and grinned slightly. She shook her head back and forth when he asked for her name. The officer understood. Oban's identity would remain secret to the rest of the officers at the extraction point. No one else asked after that point. Seven high ranking officers got onto the transport when it arrived en route to Ogun Station.

PLUS 40 MINUTES
COMMAND CORPS SUB COMMANDER
YOSEF AMIR
OGUN STATION, NUBIA
THE GANG IS ALL HERE

Amir entered the command and control building with a mass of soldiers and officers. He dipped and dodged running soldiers and maneuvered toward the officer's elevators in the lobby of the complex. Once inside only 2 or 3 other officers occupied the elevator. It stopped at the various departments and branch floors to allow the officers to exit. He was the only one left on the elevator when it reached the top of the building. Amir exited onto the command deck. A long hallway led to the CIC. Along the hallway were multiple doors on either side. These doors led to the private quarters of the command staff. Amir turned into his private quarters to suit up before going to the CIC.

His height was slightly above average with a lean physique. He had an angular face, olive skin, and perfectly styled hair combined with the confidence and bravado of a hollywood star. Emerald green eyes and stunningly long black eyelashes made his gaze hypnotic. Recently he broke off a 5-year relationship with the number one model in the Nubian System. It created a buzz around the CIC for the last two weeks, even stone cold Masters read an article or two to know what was going on. Amir was a star that was only eclipsed by the war hero Masters and the descendant of the found Kevin Johnson.

He entered his command quarters and quickly got to work. The bag he carried was tossed onto the couch along with his white shirt. Bare chested, he walked to the white wall. With a quick thought, he commanded a hidden door to open. Once invisible seams were exposed and then formed a door. It opened to reveal a combat closet. The dress uniform of the Command

Corps hung to the right of the closet, but those uniforms were no longer the standard.

Battledress was now required and Sub Commander Amir grabbed his Command Corps exosuit known as a CC-ECU. The suit was constructed of light carbon fibers, exotic nano-fibers, and materials. Once equipped, the wearer doesn't have to remove it to eat, sleep, or go to the bathroom for at least two weeks. Though after 5 days or so most soldiers will take it off to allow for the suit to clean itself. The suit feeds off body heat, water, and waste to power its systems.

Amir grabbed his sidearm and placed it on his hip into the holster strap to the CC-ECU. Ready for duty, he walked into the hallway and smelled Rodgers before he saw him. He turned to the drunk man that stumbled down the hallway in an open button-down shirt and shorts. Amir thought the klaxon interrupted him during a bad time. It clearly caught Rodgers at a worse time. The old man of the command team smiled from ear to ear. Amir shook his head back and forth with a smirk.

"Wow you can't teach these kids nothing," joked Amir as he teased his 100 year elder.

"We need to kill these squids so I can go back to celebrating my birthday. They messed up my party," Rodgers joked back.

"Hey, word of advice. Get a quick scrub down. You smell like shit. If Masters smells you like that in the CIC, he will kill you. If Kahn smells you like that, you will be court-martialed. She is on deck now. Watch yourself grandpa," Amir said as Rodgers laughed a little too hard at the joke.

"Sorry I don't shit roses and daffodils like you, pretty boy," responded the grizzled vet in the only way he could.

"Rodgers, you may also need to wait another ten minutes to ensure that the nanobots removed the rest of the liquor in your system before stepping on the command deck," said Amir as he moved toward the deck from the hallway. The other Sub Commander agreed and went into his room to sober up, shower, and get dressed.

Sub Commander Amir walked down the hallway toward the CIC. He quickly booted his internal sub routines and predesigned read outs. Information from the systems began to populate his HUD. Despite the bravado he showed he was not eager to face the Poveen once again. Painful memories of the last engagement still haunted his sleep and some of his waking hours.

Amir strolled into the CIC and walked to his station. Within seconds he connected and booted it up ready to take orders from Kahn. The process took about thirty seconds from the beginning to the end. He toggled to the combat preset on the station and added it to the rest of the presets on his HUD. A couple of seconds later he got to work. His task list was empty and he wasn't given any new orders from the commanding officers.

Amir began running down the preset checklist for alien system invasion. One by one he brought systems on line and readied others to be brought online later. Next he readied subsystems and deployment orders for local forces like police and fire. Lastly he started the prep work and ran diagnostics on the automated defenses and units deployed around Nubia and on other planets. The CIC was eerily quiet though all the officers on the deck worked at a feverous pace. Sub Commander Amir pinged General Okafor with a direct voice messenger. Without raising her head, she answered his ping.

“Yes, sir?”

“What is going on here? My queue is empty. What are you all working on so intently?”

“Ask Vice Commander Kahn sir. I am not permitted to distribute yet.”

The Sub Commander pinged Vice Commander Kahn and she denied his request. He tried it again and she refused again with a message, “One second.” Amir wasn’t going to be ignored.

“So, I see ladies night didn’t go well,” Amir said audibly. The Sub Commander received the response he thought he would receive. Amir signaled that he would not make it easy to ignore. Kahn looked at him like she was going to rip his head off, Quasar Rodriguez struggled not laugh but smirked in an extremely awkward way, and General Okafor shook her head the way she would towards one of her children doing something stupid.

It was meant to get the attention of the three high level officers at the rectangular command table. The response told him that this was not a drill. And needed to be brought into the loop. Until that point, he didn’t know for sure, but it was now obvious to him that the officers were consumed with the work. A drill would not consume them to this level.

“Hey, in all seriousness, it is way too quiet in here. It is time to start pepping these officers up,” said Amir as Kahn burned a hole in his face with her stare. Amir looked back directly into Kahn’s eyes without flinching. Okafor and Rodriguez didn’t outrank Amir so they remained quiet during the outburst. Sub Commander Amir knew Vice Commander Kahn wouldn’t allow a second outburst to stand in the CIC.

“Sub Commander Amir, why don’t you go do it then,” said Kahn. Amir agreed to her command. The charismatic man started to make his rounds around the command deck. He encouraged the officers while he looked at the station screens. Most of the officers on the bridge worked diligently on the problem and didn’t think twice about hiding the work from a commanding officer. A minute into his rounds, Kahn realized she got played. Amir wanted to make the rounds as soon as he saw that his queue was empty and needed to find a reason.

Vice Commander Kahn was much older than Amir, though they both entered the Command Corps Academy at the same. Kahn finished first in

the class and Amir finished in the middle of pack. He didn't have half of the experience as the other officers in terms of years, but in terms of battle experience against the Poveen he was at the top. Amir served with Masters at the Battle of Butcher Bay. Masters gets most of the credit, as he should for the completely insane battle strategy, but his soldiers died executing it.

At the Battle of Butcher Bay, Amir was a Colonel in the Comet Corps. He led an assault onto a Poveen dropstar, fought through waves of enemy soldiers, made it to engineering, planted 4 nuclear weapons, and then made it off the ship. He killed over ten million Poveen soldiers on that one mission. Those soldiers would have overwhelmed the defending soldiers on the ground led by Masters. Masters always felt he owed his life to Amir and he helped his career every chance he could.

Amir returned to his station and smiled at Kahn when he returned. He figured Okafor and Rodriguez were hard at work on the ER gate and bridge problem. Kahn was working on the readiness agenda in preparation of the arrival of Masters and he stood waiting for an assignment. Amir pinged Kahn again but it was interrupted when the other Sub Commander Rodgers walked in the CIC.

Rodgers walked onto the command deck with in his CC-ECU. The extremely large human being walked over to the rectangular station hub and stood across from Amir. He thought Rodgers looked much better than he had a couple of minutes ago, and the smell was gone. Kahn's eyes moved back and forth between the two of them.

"Do you need something from me sir?" asked Amir. Kahn stared at him wanting to say something, but unable to find the words. The tension was thick in the room after his tour of the floor and the ladies night comment.

"What are you doing?" asked Kahn.

"Currently I am reviewing the hull design, configuration, and marking of the Poveen cruisers. I am also checking the combat logs to confirm if this is a new variant of cruiser. This is may be a new type of cruiser variant sir. Do you want to perform another task sir?" respond Amir.

"I need you on AI prep. Bring Orunmila online," said Vice Commander Kahn.

"Will do sir," replied Amir. He wasn't a fool and he was not a clown. Amir knew how to read a room. If people needed a joker, he would become one. If they needed someone serious because everyone else was joking, then he would fill the role. Kahn was the hard-nosed disciplinarian, Masters was the warrior monk filled with revolutionary strategies and wisdom beyond his age, Rodgers was the soldier that would bash his head into the wall if ordered to do so, but Amir was the glue that held the command crew together.

He could talk to an officer if they broke up with their wife or husband. If a child was sick or they needed help with a personal issue, they all came

to him. Needed advice on what shoes to wear, ask Amir. If you needed a roster assignment changed talk to Amir. That was his value to the team.

“What the fuck is going on here?” asked Rodgers to Amir via a secure channel.

“Kahn is holding back some info. Probably waiting for Masters to get here before she shares. You know she doesn’t want to say anything that may be wrong later. Okafor and Rodriguez know but are staying tight about it. Kahn has them wound up. I tried to ease tension, but professor stick in the ass is not allowing it,” responded Amir to Rodgers as he referred to Kahn’s time as a professor.

“So, you are saying the chances she tells me what is really happening is slim?”

“Very slim.”

Amir turned to Kahn. She stared at him with fury. She demanded Amir join her in the meeting room off the command deck. The duo walked to a door opposite of the hallway that led to the private officer’s rooms. They entered the first room on the right side of the hallway and Vice Commander Kahn exploded.

“What the hell is your problem Amir?”

“Excuse me sir? I don’t know what you are talking about,” asked Amir.

“Cut the shit. Professor stick in the ass? I am your commanding officer and you do not address me like that.”

“I was wondering if you were listening. What is going on and what is your problem with me sir?”

“You will know shortly. Lord Commander Masters will be on site shortly. Can you wait that long or are you going to continue to be a problem? So far you have caused nothing but disruption,” scolded Kahn.

“The way I see it sir you are the disruption. I walked on deck to a cold shoulder. I have no orders and I am in the dark on the true nature of the ER disruption. Is this a drill or is it not a drill?” responded Amir.

“Not a drill. This is real. This is very real.”

“So why not task Rodgers and I to do something meaningful until the Lord Commander arrives?”

“You will load the protocols to Orunmila. Don’t you question my commands again. Do not disrespect me again to other officers. You need to fix yourself right now or go to your quarters,” said Kahn.

Amir squinted his eyes. He wanted to challenge her but he decided that nothing good would come out of it. The situation was tense. It wouldn’t be good for anyone to have the number 2 and 4 in command of the system fighting. “Sir, I will get the protocols for Orunmila ready.”

“Thank you, Sub Commander.”

“Sir, I apologize for the comment. I knew that you had access to that communication and I shouldn’t talk about a commanding officer in that

way. You deserve more respect than that. I also apologize for my previous comment about ladies night. That was uncalled for. I felt disrespected and I didn't act with the professionalism the Command Corps demands of us," said Amir.

This statement disarmed Kahn. Sub Commander Amir gazed at her with green eyes slightly batting his full eyelashes to further disarm her. Amir was an extremely handsome man that was blessed with the ability to have others forgive him for transgressions that others would not be able to be forgiven for. His only rivals in this arena are puppies, kittens, and small children. Kahn looked at him understanding she was being disarmed but could not gather the energy to fight back.

"Sir, do you accept my apology? I want to ensure that when we go back into the CIC you trust me. I promise to not talk about anything sliding in and out of your body again, that was wrong. It was wrong to talk about such things. I just want to do you...I mean do my best, sir," he said as his hypnotic gaze turned up the heat. The slight sexual innuendo shifted her thoughts to a place they shouldn't go while on duty.

"Yes, I accept your apology. Just don't do it again," said Kahn as she walked out the room. Amir smirked to her turned back. He knew what he just did. Kahn liked to fight and argue. He took both away from her. The other thing he did was to give her a win. Kahn needed a win. Amir figured that would improve the morale on the bridge so he exposed himself to disciplinary action. One day his tricks would not work but today was not that day.

He walked back to the CIC and began to run the protocols to bring Orunmila, the system AI, to life. Both Rodriguez and Okafor looked at Amir as he performed his task with a smile on his face. They looked to Kahn and she had a smile on her face. The sudden change in hostilities between the two confused the officers. They pinged him for an explanation but he gave them the same cold shoulder they gave him when he came to the CIC. Instantly the drama took the edge off the room for them as well. Amir's plan to relieve the tension on the CIC worked.

He asked Sub Commander Rodgers if he wanted to help with the prep work for the AI and he agreed. The two worked with speed to ensure that most of the preparation would be completed before Masters arrived. The inclusion of Rodgers insured that he would not feel left out of the process. Once again, Amir provided what the soldiers needed.

PLUS 50 MINUTES
COMMAND CORPS LORD COMMANDER
MALCOM MASTERS
TRANSIT TO OGUN STATION, NUBIA
INVASION

Lord Commander Masters continued to study and categorized the information for easy access if the situation changed. The steady stream of data into the implant filled the time to Ogun Station. He paid special interest in the extraction of military officers around the planet and the activation of police units, shielding generators, and other critical systems. So far, everything ran smoothly. It was a testament to his officers that were coming online by the second to process the data needed and provide direction.

Masters was pinged by the Nubian System AI Orunmila. It sought permission for its activation. Sub Commander Amir prepped the mighty program, but Masters had to give the final say on its activation. He granted it permission to communicate with him and activated the protocols it would operate under. AI's with this level of power are illegal outside the government without consent.

"Greetings Lord Commander Masters. I am here to serve. How may I help you?" said the manly robotic voice. Masters replied, mentally asking it to study the ER gate and bridge problem and provide an assessment of the possible causes. It was to contact General Okafor and assist her in coordination of the resources needed. It agreed to the request and then faded into the background. He was pleased that the command team had already booted the powerful program. With any luck, the AI would figure out a solution to the interdictor technology shortly and they could bridge an overwhelming force in the destruction of the Poveen invaders.

He was pinged once again. The constant communication delayed his

thoughts from formation. This angered him at first, until saw the origination. It was coming from the United Planets of Humanity Armed Forces main headquarters in the Victory System. He agreed to the request and his consciousness was thrust from his current location on the transport across the galaxy to the command center in the Victory System.

His avatar stood in row aligned with 4 other system Lord Commanders facing two senior officers. The Grand Commander of the United Planets of Humanity Armed Forces and the regional space commander stood facing them. The scope of the event was starting to take form. Masters examined the other commanders out the side of his eye as they did the same. He was so focused on the invading forces in his system he didn't stop to think this may be a part of a broader event. Most of the officers he knew very well, especially the Lord Commander of the Grant System.

Five months prior, he was the Vice Commander in the Nubian System alongside of Vice Commander Kahn before his promotion. Unfortunately, when he was promoted he took three other Nubian Commanders with him, leaving Masters short-staffed. Masters nodded slightly to the tall olive-skinned man and he nodded back. The positions were set to be filled next month, but it was clear now that Masters would have to engage the enemy with a short command staff.

Regional Commander of the Echo region of space, Celeste Moon, was of average height with light blue skin, short blond hair, and purple eyes. She moved forward to the collection of avatars and spoke, "All of you are experiencing the same phenomenon in your systems. All ER bridges and gates are not functioning. The Nubian and Indo systems are both equipped with the sentry 7 sensor systems and detected Poveen cruisers within 15 minutes of the disruption of ER activity. Sichuan and Siberian Systems, equipped with the Sentry 5 systems, have verified they also have Poveen cruisers in the system. We will assume until disproven that the Grant system also has Poveen ships or equivalent Poveen technology in the system. You won't have verification for at least 7 hours as light flies if they followed the same attack plan as the other systems.

The facts that are currently shared are these. Each system has an invasion force of 14 cruisers that are now heading on various vectors in the system. They are breaking standing operating procedures of the Poveen in not keeping in constellations of 7. All ER activity stopped .122 seconds after the enemy bridged into the system. At the current speed, they will reach all targets in 95 hours and 12 minutes. The Poveen are only heading toward planets, moons, and space stations with galaxy class ER gates.

Your orders are to engage the enemy as far away from major population centers and areas of strategic importance as possible. Those of you with sentry 7 systems, prep to launch all offensive weapons from the units and stop the enemy before they can inflict losses. Since this is now a

multisystem conflict, we will raising the Protocol level to 2. Do you have any questions?” asked the Regional Commander Celeste Moon.

“Sir, can you clarify your recommendation? I need to ensure we are all in alignment,” asked Masters.

“What clarification do you need? Once the targets are acquired, you are to burn constellations toward the enemy and destroy the squids or fire missiles from the S7s and destroy your enemy,” barked Celeste Moon.

“Sir, we are not to consider ourselves Dark Sentinels? You would not consider our systems behind enemy lines without means of support? Don’t we have to protect all our military forces now, at the cost of civilian forces? That is the disconnect,” questioned Masters. The Supreme Commander of Galactic Command stepped forward. He was an extremely tall man with pale skin and a gray beard.

“We have not lost 5 systems and I am appalled that you would say something like that. Why do you feel like you are a Dark Sentinel? Be mindful of your answer. I do not tolerate officers that cannot follow simple orders. Your answer will determine whether you will be relieved of command or not,” said the Supreme Commander. Masters never flinched or wavered mentally at the threat.

“Sir, we attempted to establish an ER bridge half a light year from the center of the system and it did not work. The reach of the interdicator technology is extensive. Best case scenario, you find a way to bridge to that location and enter the system and reach our location in six to nine months. Worst case, the interdicator field is a light year or more in distance. That would translate to two or three years before any support can reach the system.

We have also assumed that because we can’t form ER bridges or gates, that the enemy can’t form ER bridges or gates. Ten minutes from now, a thousand cruisers can jump into our system and we wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. This is currently a form of blockade, and since the beginning of time blockades have been considered an act of war. It is considered that because of its ability to deny access to resources. My system is self-sufficient, but what about Grant and Sichuan? We provide them with half the food they consume. If we burn away from our fortified locations now toward the targeted attack vectors and more enemy starships bridge into the system or the current cruisers bridge into other parts the system, they could cause tremendous damage. If we use our S7 missiles, we also run the risk of giving away the locations of our defenses.

If you cannot support us when we need assistance, then we must be considered Dark Sentinels and proceed with preparation for a long siege. I don’t like it any more than you do. I understand the political ramifications for you and for us. We need to prepare for a long unsupported defense of the system without resupply. I am also aware that 14 cruisers is not a force

that any of us should fear. They would need a multiple of that number to do any real damage. We know that and they know that so why attack with such a small force.

I recommend consolidation of forces around population or strategic centers and waiting for the Poveen to attack. This provides us with the needed time to prepare for defense, to organize the population, and to research the tech that is negating our systems. We need time more than any other resource at this moment,” said the Nubian System Lord Commander in confidence.

“Interesting. How do the rest of you feel about that opinion? What action do you feel that we should conduct? Speak now,” said the Supreme Commander. The rest of the room was silent. “We all have to be careful in a moment like this that our egos, past performance, and personal preference do not interfere with our judgment. We all need to respect the chain of command, is that clear? Do I need to tell you all what is at stake here? Work the problem. Lord Commander Masters speaks some truth. I do not feel that you have lost the systems and I will not declare you Dark Sentinels. However, I agree that we should not move our military assets out of fortified positions until we know more. We will reconvene in two hours when we have a clearer picture of the Poveen aggression.”

The Regional Commander Celeste Moon then spoke. “Do not jeopardize the safety of the systems that you command. We are placing the defense of the system in your hands. Everyone is dismissed, I know you have a lot to contend with now. Lord Commander Masters, I need you to stay behind,” requested Regional Commander Moon as the other four system commanders and the overall Galactic Commander faded from the virtual meeting room.

Once everyone was gone she spoke, “Why didn’t you take this job again?”

“Because the most terrifying force in this galaxy is my wife. I believe if I am stuck at the Ogun Station and I don’t come home for a week she will get in a spacecraft and destroy the Poveen herself to get me home,” said Masters as the two old friends spoke.

Masters was offered her job as Regional Commander 5 months prior and turned it down because he wasn’t renewing his contract with the United Planets of Humanity Armed Forces when it expired in 2 years. 50 years of service was enough for him. They offered the job to Moon after he denied it and she accepted. This created the vacancy in the Lord Commander position in the Grant System. At first the UPHAF offered Vice Commander Kahn the position but she turned it down respectfully because she wanted the Nubian job when Masters retired. So they offered the position to the other Vice Commander under his watch, Anthony Manzoni, and he accepted. Then he took the two Sub Commanders with him too

become his Vice Commanders.

“Masters, I understand the dynamic at play here. I need to know you will follow my orders. I am the commanding officer here,” demanded Moon.

“I will follow orders. I have fought the Poveen three times sir and every time they surprised me. They are not to be taken lightly. This attack is not what it appears. I know it,” explained Masters.

“I need you to do better than that. The others will follow whatever you do no matter how hard I try. I am asking you, please do not do that to me again,” demanded Moon.

“This is not about us. This is about the people of the system. Sir, my wife is here, my son and daughter are here, my father is here, and I will not risk them. If you can’t handle input from you Lord Commanders then you should not have taken that position. We are going to make you angry, but in that anger will come truth. Only the man without bias can see the truth. The only outcome I care about is the protection of the people in this system. 95 hours from now we be in combat with the enemy.

I am looking at the best case or worse case scenarios. Best case, I have 14 cruisers in my system. We engage them in 40 hours and win the conflict but sustain a minor loss of military men and equipment. In the worst case, those 10 ships turn into 70 ships or 490 ships and they can jump around the system engaging how they see fit. Orunmila, our military computer, estimates that it will take at least 305 Poveen capital stars to break our defenses on Nubia and 105 to defeat the systems on Kush without the aid of Space Command. Both require them to land soldiers on the surface to disable the planetary shielding and the planetary gun’s systems.

They are in control and that is not something that we are comfortable with. I had a sister that was addicted to a drug. She couldn’t get help until she understood that the drug was stronger than she was. Once she realized that, she became something great. We need to find that clarity in this situation. They have the element of surprise, better technology, and integrated coordination. They know how this is supposed to play out and we don’t, so we are striving to gain some control over the situation, but we do not have control. I want them to feel in control. That is the only way we will gain the upper hand.

If we are too aggressive, we will feel in control but we will not be. We must make decisions that force the enemy commanders to make decisions and commit forces. We must ensure that they are the ones that are guessing our tactics. I want them to have to press to win. When they do that I will crush them. Though we feel like we are under a lot of pressure, the commanders of these invasion forces are also under pressure from their command structure. They follow orders and have officers that they must serve. They have declared war on another race. We are in trouble. We are

in danger. We are not in control here. I have come to understand this.”

“I understand your perspective Lord Commander. We will speak again in 2 hours. Good Luck Malcom. You are going to need it.”

The transmission ended and Masters’ consciousness returned to the transport. He stood from his seated position and walked down the ramp onto the roof of the command building. For a moment, he looked at the stunning view of the military base and the city nearby. It would still be hours before the sun rose, but since almost every light was on in the city and on the base, the horizon had a glow. It had a beauty to it. This could be the last time that he would see it like this again.

PLUS 55 MINUTES
SYSTEM COMET CORPS QUASAR
RYU TANAKA
OGUN STATION, NUBIA
FORM UP

Quasar Tanaka exited the officer's elevator and walked toward the command deck personal quarters. The tall lean man reviewed the latest data. Orunmila was now online and the AI filled his queue with requests and access permissions to enter systems under his command. The smooth gliding movements subtly demonstrated his extreme athleticism. Tanaka prepaid himself mentally for the coming battle as more information populated his HUD. The Comet Corps was one of the three rapid response branches alongside the Astro and Meteor Corps. Tanaka believed that his force would likely be one of the forces to be called into action.

Within a few steps, he entered the room and prepared for combat. Unlike the command corps officers Masters, Kahn, Amir, and Rodgers, the Generals and Quasars of the branches bunked up. These units had the same footprint as the other suites but a bedroom replaced the open dining space and the master bath became a Jack and Jill. His roommate, System Meteor General Morris Solis, equipped his MC-ECU in preparation for the coming conflict. Like Rodgers and Masters, who also served in the Meteor Corps, he was a mountain of a man. His neck was thicker than Tanaka's chest and his biceps thicker than his quads.

Tanaka was raised in the Japan System on planet Tokyo. He could trace the purity of his ethnic heritage to the year twelve hundred. Solis, on the other hand, seemed to possess a mixture of every ethnicity from Earth. The man had blue skin, and his bone structure was the densest type of any human due to the 1.6 gs on his home planet of Atlas. The people of Atlas

embraced the new era with the extensive augmentations. Tanaka, on the other hand, came from a system that embrace the pace of augmentation. They were not racist toward those that did by any measure, but Tanaka felt that they were not truly committed to the future the way other systems were. The old ways still dominated the system.

Tanaka married his childhood sweetheart at 18 when he joined the service. When he served in his system's Planetary Force he excelled as an officer. Eventually he was selected to become a member of the elite Samurai Squad. This elite unit participated in a rescue mission on the planet Holiday. The planet was overrun with a genetically-created creature in an act of xeno-terrorism. His army group was noticed for its bravery. Shortly after, Tanaka was offered a commission in the UPHAF Comet Corps. Until that point, he didn't even consider leaving the Japan system. He saw this as a great honor, so he left the Japan system and accepted the commission.

He had lived on Nubia for the last eight years and he felt that the family was better for it. He never would have imagined when he was child that he would come home to his wife dancing to reggae music. The first 3 of his 7 children were married living in the Japan system. His fourth joined Space Command and is on a spacecraft somewhere experiencing the universe. His fifth and sixth are both married to Nubians, breaking the cycle of ethnic exclusion, and that pleased him. Some of his children passed down the tradition while others joined the broader universe. It was the balance that he sought. His youngest son now dated General Okafor's youngest daughter. Amr joked that they could marry off the last of the children with one marriage.

"General Solis, I hope this didn't ruin your day as much as it did mine," joked Tanaka.

"Actually, it did. Remember that girl I have been dating, Jamie Juelz? It is getting a little more serious. I am thinking about marrying her. We were having a nice night. I was going to propose but this cut that short. I hope we kill these squids fast and get back to living," said Solis.

"Great, congratulations big fella."

"She hasn't said yes yet."

"I have seen the two of you together. She will say yes."

"Hope so. Anything exciting with you Tanaka?" asked Solis.

"Nothing. I was sitting at home watching a movie. It wasn't a good one. My wife was forcing me to watch it. This got me out of it," responded Tanaka as the two men laughed.

"I thought you said it ruined your day?"

"The last couple of months I haven't spent much time with my wife and it was good to spend time with her even if I was forced to watch a trash romantic comedy."

Tanaka quickly dressed in his CC-ECU. The orange highlights were

indicative of the color of the Comet Corps and contrasted the blue highlights of the Meteor Corps and blue skin of General Solis. The two men traded ideas on the coming conflict and shortly moved into the hallway. The System Planetary Forces General Jamal Nasir and System Orbital Guard Quasar Kevin Johnson just left the unit across the hallway. The four men greeted each other in the hallway trading pleasantries as they turned toward the CC.

“Where is all that beef going? It is like a supermarket of handsome in this hallway. Yo, what am I going to eat today? You have dark chocolate Nasir, milk chocolate Johnson, blueberry Solis, or sashimi Tanaka on the menu. What is a girl to do?” said System Astro Quasar Natasha Might. Most of the time you heard Might before you saw her and this time wasn’t any different. If you needed a joke told or not, a joke was going to be told if you were around Might. Her brand of humor rubbed everyone wrong eventually.

“Sashimi? Might, you can do better than that. What happened to lo mein?” asked Tanaka as he fired back while the other three officers snickered. Quasar Might walked toward them with long deliberate strides. Her six-foot seven-inch lean frame was the byproduct of growing up on the low gravity world of Brooklyn in the America System. She had porcelain skin, fiery red short hair, and eyes like the clearest ocean water.

“Sorry, I didn’t expect you guys to be in the hallway and I had to work on the fly. Besides lo mein is Chinese and I want to be accurate. What do you think about all of this? Crazy yo? Squids raiding again?” Asked Might as she flawlessly maneuvered from the brass to comment to a serious one. Even though Might was annoying at times, Tanaka was always impressed by the way she fought and conducted herself on duty.

“Seems different. I have been hearing a lot of chatter about something being wrong with the gates. I think something more is going on here. I hope we find out soon. Hey, has anyone else been contact by Orunmila?” asked Tanaka.

“Orunmila contacted me as well. He needed permissions for ER gate control and other subsystems,” responded Orbital Guard Quasar Johnson.

“Me too,” said Planetary General Nasir.

“Yep, seems like it is more. I think we can rule out a drill. Too many people have been called up. This is real. Squids are in the system. Just don’t know how real. I only track 14 cruisers. Does anyone else have something different?” asked Tanaka. The rest of the soldiers agreed that they saw the same information that he had received.

“Anybody fought squids yet?” asked Tanaka.

“Once. We lost. The only time I ran from a battle. We were engaged in a scouting mission father down the spiral arm. We found a system that was just smaller than Victory. We wanted to scout more. Poveen jumped into

the system with a couple of cruisers. We only had 30 starvettes, 5 dreadstars, and a bunch of science spacecraft. The energy weapon they had ripped into our formation. Worst defeat I have ever experienced. Barely made it out. Squids don't play around when it comes to killing humans. 14 cruisers aren't enough to take out the system, but whoever is sent to stop them will suffer losses if they are not careful," said Quasar Might.

"I fought them in xeno-terrorist attacks in the Holiday system. Well not them but the creatures that they created. The five-meter-tall devilish creatures they unleashed on the planet. My men stopped the advance of those creatures, but we took losses. Saved two hundred thousand people though, before we had to fall back," said Tanaka as they reached the end of the hallway.

The five officers walked onto the command deck and moved to the rectangular table with the work stations in the middle of the room. The entire officer team was now in the room, except for Masters. He was on the roof speaking to UPHAF command. They all waited for the better part of ten minutes before he pinged the team that he was on the way down. Tanaka waited patiently while watching the various spacecraft under his command flicker to active duty from non-active.

Lord Commander Masters walked into the CIC. The entire deck saluted the Lord Commander and he saluted back. Masters walked to the front of the room and took his position at the head of the rectangular workstation hub. He activated the terminal, looked up at the men and women in the room, and spoke.

"Everyone, here is the deal. I am sorry that I have not shared all the information I know with the broader network. I needed to know for sure before we disseminated the information. I just returned from a meeting with the Regional Commander of Echo Region. We are not the only system that is going through this. Four other systems in Echo Region have been compromised by Poveen cruisers. Each one has 14 cruisers in the system on vectors to intercept major population centers that have Galaxy level ER gates.

Some of you may know this already but for those who do not know, we have been denied the use of our ER gates and bridges. At first we thought the problem was a natural disaster of some kind, but we have since confirmed that the Poveen have some sort of interdicator technology that is disrupting space and time. Currently, we don't have any idea how they are doing it and quite honestly we don't even have a clue.

Indo, Grant, Sichuan, and Siberian also have been denied the use of ER gates and bridges. The cruisers will make contact in approximately 95 hours if the vector and speed do not change in all the systems that the Poveen have jumped into. We will start receiving real time information from those systems shortly via headquarters.