

Part One: The Invaders

Poril rose from the lounge when the High Commander came in. His crest and tendrils fluttered nervously, despite his best efforts to control them. A fine purple mist hovered in the air.

“At ease,” rumbled the Commander, courteous enough to ignore the General’s nervousness. “You have a report on the subjugation efforts?”

“Yes, my lord.” Poril settled back as the Commander sank into her own lounge. He dipped a tentacle into his pouch and came up with his tablet. “Alas, the news is not good.”

“How can this be?” Three of the Commander’s eye stalks swiveled forward. “We were told this was a minor planet, most amenable to our subjugation teams.”

“Yes, yes.” Poril sternly controlled his tentacles’ erratic quivers. “But there are, it seems, a subspecies of the dominant life form that is unlike any we have ever seen.”

“Go on, go on.” The Commander scratched her scales and flattened her crest. “Tell me all.”

Poril coughed and the mist thickened. “We began with the usual means of subjection, merely manipulating the principal mode of entertainment and increasing the tribal rivalries. This planet is unusually amenable to such trickery.”

“Yes, yes.” The Commander waved nine of her tentacles. “Simple buffoons. But go on.”

“But this subspecies, as I said, is unusually resistant to such manipulation. They seem not to care for the rivalries, or else are unmoved by them.” Poril rippled his crest.

“So we went to the next step, tampering with the infrastructure. This planet relies heavily on artificial lighting, artificial air, indoor plumbing. We thought it would be a simple way to cause breakdown in their society.”

“And?” The Commander leaned forward, eye stalks swiveling eagerly.

“It might have,” Poril said, his crest flattening, “but for this subspecies. They can go all day without relieving themselves, and think nothing of doing without their artificial air. When the young ones under their care whine about heat or cold, this subspecies threatens them with more of it, and the younglings tremble in fear.”

The Commander frowned, and her many fangs glistened in the light. “These creatures, they care for the young?”

“Indeed, they are given special care of them, when nobody else will do it.” Poril consulted his notes. “They are treated almost as wizards or demons, and given magical names to invoke their powers. The young fear them as no other, and will sit for hours under their spell, while the creatures stand before them and speak in riddles or make arcane drawings.”

“What else can you tell me of these beings?”

“They have some power or unique genetic trait that sets them apart.” Poril scrolled down his tablet. “The most recent subjugation was the introduction of a virus, meant to weaken and cripple the population.” He shivered, and his scales rippled like waves in the breeze. “These beings were untouched, my lord! Of all the creatures on the planet, they were untouched by any disease we could give them!”

The Commander stared. “Have you images? Let me see these monsters.”

Poril scrolled down his tablet and found one of the scout’s images. “Here, my lord, you see a number of them. The females are predominately of middle years, heavy and drably clad. The males are often younger, and viewed with suspicion by the rest of the species as desiring mates of the same gender. But they are all of the subspecies.”

“You said these creatures were given names by the others. What is that?”

Poril studied his tablet. “TEACHERS, my lord.”

Part Two: The Beans

The lights were dim in the Commander's chamber, so she could better see the displays that ringed the walls and hovered in the air above her bulbous eyes. She lay back in her lounge, tentacles twiddling with a dozen buttons and lights. A soft chime alerted her to the entrance of her minister of subjugation, Poril, with the latest report on the planet below that stubbornly resisted their benign efforts to tame it.

Poril entered, and the Commander knew the news was bad. His crest was flat, his scales dull and still. Even his eye-stalks drooped, eyes gazing at the floor and walls and ceiling in random patterns. He settled into the lounge opposite the Commander and sighed, a thin pink mist filling the air between them.

"What news do you have for me, Poril?" the Commander said gently, rippling her own crest in soothing waves.

Poril dipped a tentacle into his pouch, and came up with his tablet. "Alas, my lord," he said, "the news is very bad indeed. We thought we had at last discovered a way to subjugate the TEACHERS." He tapped his tablet with the tip of a tentacle, and brought up the image of the cluster of TEACHERS. "You see, my lord, these large containers." A red circle flashed around the cylinders in the creature's hands. "They contain a liquid of a unique kind. When our scouts learned that all the TEACHERS drank this liquid, they obtained some and brought it to our scientists."

"Yes?" The Commander leaned forward, half a dozen eyes swiveling to gaze upon this new data. "And what was found?"

“It is the juice of a bean, a tropic bean which grows in the southern hemisphere of the planet. The TEACHERS drink this juice in great quantities, steeping it in hot water and sometimes adding sweetener and the excreta of other mammals.”

Poril scrolled through his tablet notes. The Commander watched him with half her eyes, the other half watching the notes that slid along the screens. “The scouts soon discovered that all the inhabitants of the planet imbibe this juice. The youth drink it in sweetened concoctions of carbonated water. Those in positions of power drink concentrated portions of it, enabling them to work extended periods. The elderly drink a weakened form in special cups, and some cultures have whole ceremonies around drinking this juice.”

The Commander sat forward. “Then, we have them! We need only have our scientists alter this juice and use it to bend the creatures—including the TEACHERS—to our will! They are ours!”

Poril sagged deeper into the lounge. “Alas, my lord. We are undone. Some of the scouts have fallen to the spell of this intoxicating juice. While performing reconnaissance on the planet, some scouts were emboldened to sample this juice, and at once fell prey to its power. Others followed, and now half the lower ranks are addicted to this poison. They have begun raiding the planet for more of these beans, and the inhabitants are becoming aware of our presence.”

The Commander sat silent. “That is forbidden.”

“Yes.”

“Have you informed the High Council?”

“I could do nothing else, my lord.”

“Then you know what must happen.”

Poril rippled his crest, and his scales flattened.

“You are a good servant, a loyal soldier of the Council,” the Commander said. “Take your life in the way you think best. I shall take full responsibility. No harm shall come to your clan.”

Poril bowed and left the chamber.

Alone, the Commander watched the data scrolling down the screens for a time. The forces of the High Council would be arriving soon, and all would be for naught. She could not blame Poril; he had only done his duty.

She dipped a tentacle into her pouch and came up with the metal vacuum the scout had given her. While she waited, at least she could have a nice cup of coffee.