

# In Humanity's Defense

Sub-Administrator Oman Druze found Administrator Lyster atop the north wall of the Urwald settlement. The grizzled former Ranger stood, hands clasped behind his back, in full battle armor, an ancient but serviceable assault rifle near at hand.

"Has the Nomad arrived?" Lyster asked without turning around.

Druze said nothing until he was standing next to Lyster. Beyond the wall lay a few miles of cleared ground, where the settlers had planted crops and built pens for livestock. Beyond that, Urwald's endless jungle waited, a verdant tangle so dense it was near impassable without a laser cutter. Impassable to a human, that is. The gargantuan Emphyrean battle cruiser looming on the horizon and the hundreds of machine troops aboard it would carve a path to the settlement with inhuman ease.

"Yes, sir," Druze replied. Lyster insisted on being called "sir," even though the settlement was a civilian operation. "The Nomad is five miles to the south."

Lyster nodded. "Good. I expect a Ranger battalion is on the way here."

"No, sir," Druze said carefully. "The Nomad has not sent us troops."

Lyster whirled on his second, his hands clenched into fists, his eyes bulging and his nostrils flared. Lyster was a man given to rage-fueled outbursts. Rumors persisted that he hadn't left the Ranger Corps voluntarily, that his foul temper had ended his career in a court martial. "What do you mean? We are about to be overrun by Emphyreans. Are they going to just leave us here to die?"

Druze flinched. Lyster's rages often grew violent. He wanted to offer some explanation, but words failed him.

"No. You will not be left to die," a mechanical voice said nearby as a strange figure emerged from the battlement stairwell. The emissary from the Nomad stood on four spider-like legs, and its conical torso was fitted with an additional two limbs, each ending in three-fingered hands. Its head was cylindrical and dotted with sensory nodes that glowed a soft blue.

"Sir, this is Master Tulcan," Druze said, finding his voice at last. "Captain Hastings sent him to speak with you."

Lyster grimaced. "So instead of soldiers, Hastings sends me a Keeper. A former Emphyrean."

Master Tulcan's optical nodes blinked. "I once dwelled amongst the ancient consciousnesses of the Great Constellation, but my allegiance is to humanity."

"Then you've come to fight for us?"

"I have come to remove any obstacles to the evacuation of this settlement. The Nomad is large enough to hold the entire population."

"You expect us to abandon our homes?" Lyster said. "We've spent ten years turning this godforsaken jungle into a working settlement. We have bled and sacrificed, and I will be damned if I'm going to just give it up to a bunch of soulless machines."

Tulcan moved closer to Lyster, legs clicking on the synthicrete. "Whether you stay or go, the Emphyreans will take this settlement. That is unavoidable. You can, however, save hundreds of lives if you leave now."

"Sir," Druze added, "we already have reports of an advance force of Emphyrean troops. Enough to wipe us out."

Lyster snatched up his assault rifle. He didn't point it, but the message was clear. "I will not give the order to abandon the settlement. I'd rather die."

Tulcan's torso rotated with a whir, his optical sensors orienting on Druze. "You are sub-administrator, yes?"

"Yes, that's correct," Druze said.

"Do you agree with my assessment of the impending attack or with Administrator Lyster's mindset?" Tulcan asked.

"I don't give a goddamn what he thinks, machine," Lyster said. "The people of this settlement follow me. My orders."

Druze looked out over the wall, mostly so he wouldn't have to look Lyster in the eye when he answered Master Tulcan's question. He expected his next words might be his last. "We have to evacuate. We cannot win this fight."

"Coward," Lyster spat.

Tulcan turned back to Lyster. "It is not craven to save lives, Administrator. It is humane. Will you give the order to evacuate?"

"I will not," Lyster said, and now he did he point his rifle at Tulcan. "Get off my wall and get out of my settlement."

Druze had witnessed violence on many occasions in his time on Urwald. It was in an inhospitable world filled with dangerous predators, and the remoteness of the settlement invited the scourge of piracy. He'd seen settlers torn apart by beasts, shot and burned by pirates, and even executed by Lyster himself. Master Tulcan made all of that seem like the work of crude children.

The Keeper's right arm shot up, grabbed the barrel of Lyster's assault rifle, and ripped it from his grasp. Tulcan then struck Lyster with his left hand. There was a bright azure flash and the stench of ozone. Lyster stumbled back, eyes round and horrified as he stared down at an eight-inch hole bored directly through his armor and his body. Druze realized, nauseatingly, he could see behind Lyster through the awful wound.

Lyster opened his mouth to speak, but all that came was a torrent of blood. He dropped to his knees and then pitched over face-first. He lay still.

"You—you killed him," Druze said.

Tulcan's head oriented on Druze. "A regrettable affair but a necessary one. Now, according to your settlement charter, on the death of the administrator, the sub-administrator assumes his title and duties."

Druze's mouth worked, but no words came. He thought he might vomit.

"You are in charge, Administrator Druze," Tulcan said.

Druze stared at Lyster's corpse then turned to the man's killer. "You said your allegiance was to humanity. Is that true?"

Tulcan strode forward and laid a hand on his shoulder. It was a shockingly human gesture. "I was human, and I have been protecting humanity long before they took to the stars. I protect them now."

Beyond the wall the jungle shook and disgorged a dozen silvery bodies—the advance force of Emphyreans.

Tulcan stepped clear of Druze and a circle of runes spiraled around the Keeper's body. He pointed his right hand and one of the Emphyreans below burst into flames, its metallic body blackening beneath the onslaught of arcane fire.

"One man is not humanity, Administrator. One life is nothing against hundreds," Tulcan said. "Go. Save as many as you can. The Nomad will land shuttles near the south gate. Lead your people there. I will buy you time."

Druze watched more Emphyreans emerge from the jungle. "They'll destroy you. Come with us."

"Combat with the saber warriors is an acceptable risk," Tulcan said. "Once the Aeon in command is aware of my presence, they will spare me. We have . . . an understanding."

The Keeper then leapt over the wall and hit the ground like a great metal insect. He scuttled forward and struck an Emphyrean with fusion blades mounted on each arm. The automaton came apart in a burst of metal shards, and Tulcan moved on to the next, destroying it as well.

Druze ran to a terminal near the stairwell. He punched in his access code and took control of the comm system. His voice rang loud and strong through the settlement. "This is Administrator Druze. All citizens are to meet at the south gate immediately. We must evacuate."