

From [Commander] Fauré's perspective, Kelly O'Rourke, a native of Ireland and a female officer in the Irish Air Force, brought precisely the kind of global representation and diversity to SSPC that he hoped to create.

Kelly's appearance [on his videoscreen]—her bright red hair, fair skin, symmetrical facial structure, and slim shoulders—took Fauré by surprise. Her photos didn't do her justice. She was quite a change from the typical ex-pilots, engineers, and computer geeks SSPC among the recruits.

"Welcome to the Space Shield Project Command, Officer O'Rourke," he began, launching into his standard introductory speech. "I'm sorry we haven't yet had the opportunity to talk individually, and it's already been almost five months since you arrived! I hope you are enjoying New York City's unique attractions.

"We need more personnel with your academic credentials and willingness to work on this vital non-military project. It may not seem as exciting as preparing to interdict killer satellites. But the intellectual problems are just as challenging, and the fate of our planet depends on our success.

"What prompts your call?"

Kelly began her memorized explanation.

"Thank you, Commander. It is an honor to serve in your Command and be a part of its vital mission. I hope I can make a helpful and creative contribution to our work.

"I'll try to be concise. I work in the cubicle that contains the data displays showing the position and performance of Mirrors 160 to 179. A few weeks ago, I observed a tiny alteration in Mirror 170's perpendicular deviation display. The movement lasted for just a few seconds, after which the number was again static.

"I had not seen anything like that before—in fact, I was finding my windowless cubicle pretty boring. This unexplained change caught my eye because it did not seem to make any sense in terms of the Mirror's physics or mission, as I understand them from the Manuals.

"I expected a follow-up from MSTY, but she didn't issue any special report or alarm. Initially, I couldn't determine whether this short pulse was a real-world event, a statistical or sensor artifact, or a malfunction of the computer behind the display.

"Before bothering you, I took it upon myself to look through the accumulated data for earlier instances of this kind of pulse to Mirror 170's perpendicular deviation.

"I found 14 earlier occasions, each involving a tiny realignment of 0.01%. In response to my query, MSTY confirmed that each pulse did in fact increase the

mirror's perpendicular deviation by that fractional amount. But she didn't issue reports on any of them at the time they occurred.

"I've been studying the SSPC and SSP Manuals and reading the UN documents on the creation of the SSP. I reviewed the Corp's decision logs and found no record of any relevant decision or even mention of these pulses or the resulting increased angle.

"As I read the Manuals, I would think such an adjustment would need your personal approval somehow. Perhaps you know all about this adjustment. If so, let me just leave you this Memorandum detailing my findings and analysis. I realize MSTY did not find this matter sufficiently serious to warrant any warning or report.

"If there is anything more I can or should do, please tell me. And thank you for your attention."

Commander Fauré glanced at the six-page Memo Kelly had electronically delivered as she talked. It included the data Kelly had painstakingly compiled and corroborated with MSTY.

Fauré's gaze turned stern. "Let me give you some history that you could not have learned from the official documents. The decision to create the SSP was intensely controversial. Governmental, scientific, and public interest organizations were and are deeply divided about SRM and the SSP's predecessor, the so-called tropospheric veil experiment.

"That experiment was an unauthorized scheme hatched by an unidentified handful of diplomats and governments—a low-budget, hastily designed effort secretly funded by one country and abetted by another. It would have been difficult to sustain, but it did demonstrate that a dozen drone aircraft continuously spreading calcium carbonate particles in the tropopause could create an atmospheric veil. The particles reduced the amount of solar energy reaching Earth by the fractional percentage necessary to slow the pace of global warming.

"It also unintentionally exposed the existence of a clashing Russian effort to hasten the breakup of the Arctic icecap, which would facilitate Russian shipping and mineral development in the Arctic Ocean.

"The experiment ended when Russia shot down one of the drone flights, denounced it in the UN Security Council as an illegal invasion of Russian sovereignty, and demanded its termination. The clash of these two conflicting secret and uncontrolled climate modification programs created a confrontation between the United States and Russia. The US won the diplomatic struggle to create our program, but Russia has never forgiven the perpetrators.

"The UN Secretariat was tasked to recommend a solar shield plan. Instead of a veil, it proposed using reflective, energy-generating mirrors. The mirrors would have some

value as an energy source even if they were ineffective in slowing climate disruption. This approach appealed to the defense industry, which saw profit opportunities in building this complicated, high-tech infrastructure.

“Many opponents argued that neither approach was safe, in part because any program would inevitably require trade-offs between winners and losers. They feared the powerful would be taken care of, regardless of what the scientists recommended as the optimal allocation of costs and benefits.

“We still have a long way to go to persuade the world that the SSP is fair and equitable. That is an essential part of our mission.”

Commander Fauré paused to allow this flood of information to sink in. He did not praise her curiosity and diligence as she had hoped. Kelly said nothing, her face turning red as she absorbed his words.

He continued, “There is a lot more to learn about the realities of our mission than you will find in the documents. I commend your curiosity.

“But for right now, please focus on your preparations for the SSPC induction examination. It may seem dull, but you certainly don’t want to take the exam a second time. You aren’t eligible for any other work here until you pass it.

“And please don’t say anything to anyone about your conclusions or speculations on the meaning of the pulses.”

Pausing again, he added, “Now I’m sorry, but I am late for a meeting with the member of our Governing Board from Russia. If you need more guidance, come see me again.”

Commander Fauré saluted, and Kelly quickly returned the salute. Her screen went blank.

Kelly put her head in her hands.

*Well, I guess he put me in my place. What should I make of his lecture and brusque departure? Maybe he was anxious about getting to lunch on time. Or maybe not.*

*Enough speculation. I need to bear down on memorizing the Manuals so I can ace the exam.*

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Commander Fauré was equally concerned about the conversation with Officer O’Rourke, but for very different reasons.

*If she found it, others might. O’Rourke herself might talk to someone about it. She’s already said something to Jay. I need to find a way to neutralize this potential threat.*

*But right now, I need to focus on how to handle Director Malkovich and his phony expense records investigation. The O’Rourke matter will have to wait.*