

### Incoming Mission Communique....

First off, congratulations on securing the 'rights' to the Indra Pallavan Trade Routes. That was a good piece of solo work, and I admire your efforts. You're always welcome to take a partner along with you for the purposes of assisting in these missions, but I'll understand either way. The track record speaks for itself.

Speaking of which, let's briefly delve into what was just accomplished: Improved trade relations have paved the way for the possible annexation of the planets Pasma Tam and Kamenska away from the Galaxy Bloc. With your 'encouragement' to introduce them to our products, it's my hope they'll also come around (as a result of those backdoor means) to embracing our services - namely defense. As you well know, with what we're about to be facing, these unincorporated worlds can either get on board or get out the way. There's no more time for this farce of what's become a separatist's vision to achieve competitive government and independent garrison states throughout the universe.

Our actual enemy is more than capable of exploiting that nonsense especially with such an unencumbered strategic placement of these Galaxy Bloc worlds throughout the Quadron System. To be honest, I'd rather not have to send in the spacestations to institute a force relocation of these silly idealists and their petty realities. It's a waste of the precious time we no longer possess.

We've played nice by consistently warning Galaxy Bloc about this enemy with talks being held at very high levels within their consortium, but our benevolence had always been met with blind skepticism. I've personally provided proof, yet they refuse to see what's right in front of their noses. Or perhaps, they're hoping to take advantage of the situation somehow - one of those: 'We do

all the heavy lifting and get slaughtered while they saunter in and pick up the pieces'-type things. Fine.

The multitude of your associates are scattered throughout the universe attempting to trace these possibilities. For the most part, the individual worlds are pawns of Galaxy Bloc's games with their own unrelated issues and concerns, but we're starting to notice an increased militarism. Their leaders aren't foolish enough to desire to take us on head-on, but the sentiment of arming themselves beyond localized law enforcement does not bode well for the proclivities I just espoused.

Head to the planet Dio Qze. Spend some time there. See what they're about. If the world is ripe for annexation, extend an 'offer'. If there's any funny business going on, don't hesitate to call for SpaceStation Konxerus. We'll wipe that place off the face of the star maps, and I'll be back in touch with you about your next assignment. Good luck.

-G-Pile

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Angular Trifecta

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Governments come and go. I've seen this over a good portion of my lengthy military career. Some have been poorly run while others were mightily effective. But it's always funny to me when those who wish to overthrow the current administrations actually believe they'll be any different once their regime is established. Now I find that comical.

-Captain Love Borcuk  
Space Force

Am I the only person who looks at independent voters for what they truly are? At first I was like, 'Why can't these people ever make up their minds?' It's the same election cycle every couple years with pretty much the same players and usually the exact same issues. Taking voting seriously? Torn? Confused between the choices yet hopeful for the future? No. That's all crap. These people just realized their indecisiveness could be turned into and leveraged as another powerful lobby worth catering to.

-Mordo  
Galaxy Bloc

The mere threat of an advance, whether real or fabricated, is enough to spring entire megapowers to frenzied action in the hopes of preventing whatever its likelihood from coming to pass.

-Temar Leath  
New Alliance

If somebody speaks down to you like you're a child, it's pretty clear they don't respect you as an adult.

-Enderbrook Boyd  
The Enforcers



For  
Projects Never Scrapped.





## 01: Angle of Dissent

Everybody had an angle to play - Enderbrook Boyd thought. It so happened to be his responsibility to find out what the particulars of those angles were. But a month into this assignment on the planet of Dio Qze and he had found none. A loud sigh escaped from his wide-open mouth as an exhale of frustration serving up the audible evidence of this impending mission failure. His left hand caught a cocked and throbbing forehead to create the resultant posture of racked brain cells that had also settled in on the fact there might not be a way of connecting up three dots with two simple lines in order to possibly construct this obtuse angle.

Boyd piloted a Class V Fighter at the time, relatively speaking. His ship was on autopilot, so this allowed him a chance to think through these matters with a clear mind subscribing to the peaceful skies opened up by the stealth-based flight. The nagging part of his conscience that recognized the need for cutting losses and moving on did not necessarily want him to leave a mission unfinished where the deepest and most trustworthy parts of his gut were clamoring for him to pay attention to the subtle details of nuance. Still there was an understanding the specialist's employer would soon be requiring his talents elsewhere throughout the universe. Until such a call-up occurred, he remained a part of a current mission needing to be completed.

Utilizing the cover of an investor from his previous successful missions on the planets Pasma Tam and Kamenska, Boyd sunk into his latest role with unlimited funds and the controlled arrogance to flaunt it. This was the honey that could attract the

bees (all those wayward unincorporated planets) and cause them to sign onto the lopsided albeit ultimately beneficial trade agreements which could be used to leverage a growing dependence upon his faction - the Space Force. Energy sources, food rations, materials refinement, technological advances, and basic textiles were all part of these deals, but his faction's main export was protection.

Now this was not some sort of throwback to those old-school mob-style politics as the added benefit of protection was rarely ever discussed during negotiations, but from Boyd's perspective, the idea was just the same. So where the honey did not work in attracting those bees, a flamethrower was called for. In his most natural capacity as an agent of the Space Force's black ops outfit called the Enforcers, he became the subject of legend - a person who had been highly practiced in such reverberating tactics as regime change and assassination the specialist could teach academy courses to the tune of a long and heralded tenure. If only he even existed. For him, a dual-pronged approach was sufficient: Get the unincorporated planets to sign onto the program individually through a backdoor entry circumventing their overarching governing authority and union called Galaxy Bloc or replace an individual planet's leadership with more amenable participants - and then get each to sign onto the program with the backdoor entry.

More obligation than charity, Boyd might have been better served to dedicate his nomadic affinity to an outside sales position if he was looking for work that could be performed for the sake of his own health. As a result of these personal sacrifices and the sacrifices from others of those Enforcers deployed throughout the stars like him, Galaxy Bloc was going to accept the hidden gift of protection. Nobody ultimately had any other choice

in the matter. Powerful enemies of the Space Force were set to make a beeline for the Quadron System, and they happened to be more than capable of exploiting the stubbornness of the unincorporated planets to not only his faction's but the universe's detriment.

At first glance, Boyd's methods might seem to be heavy-handed because they were being performed in the interest of the covert, but he was only called in because the ongoing high profile (yet secretive) talks being held overtly between the Space Force and Galaxy Bloc at levels far exceeding his pay grade had stalled. The leadership of those unincorporated planets knew about the impending threat and refused to do anything! Whether they did not believe in the intel or were sitting on their hands to wait out the threat for rapacious aims of swooping in to pick up the pieces was the subject for a debate the universe did not have time to moderate.

Four megapowers existed throughout this universe, and they each held down a corner of it as a claim to their vast dominion. The Space Force, Doran Aristocracy, Pillorian Regime, and Slorgs had carved up systems and sectors as well as they had carved out ideologies and legacies.

The Space Force originated from Earth over in the Terran System but grew to include the Exilis and Quadron (where Boyd was at currently) Systems as part of their empire. The Doran Aristocracy hailed from the massive Crystalline System and was actually in the midst of a civil war with the New Alliance - the aforementioned enemy amassing a fleet that could easily overwhelm this divided universe and the source of much angst among those rallying to the charge to try and stop them. The Pillorian Regime was by far the most powerful megapower because it boasted of no fleet and only a tiny footprint within the system known as

Explorigvasun, but they were a faction of Ethereals - the beings many cultures prayed to. The Crabmartian Slorgs from Xenos happened to be as old as time, so they possessed incalculable numbers of people within their midst and held jurisdiction over the remaining and still expanding space of Explorigvasun.

To the Space Force who had once been to war with the Slorgs but had since put aside differences in order to become tenuous allies at worst or terraforming partners at best, Galaxy Bloc was little more than an annoyance that would not be tolerated during this moment of increasing peril. The unincorporated planets were not even considered a smaller faction like the Robots or botanical Rylaea yet wound up cementing a place as both a micro nuisance and strategic vulnerability. When the boots eventually hit the ground to fight this impending war against the New Alliance, these worlds were located deep within the Quadron System and prime targets for being usurped, converted, plus used as enemy staging points. In Boyd's mind, only two options existed: Get with the program or get lost. Numerous chances had been given for them to fall in line, so if open talks, socioeconomic espionage, and black ops were not enough to do the trick, then SpaceStation Konxerus would be along in short order to annihilate those planets for the purposes of creating a preliminary rampart from the asteroids of their rubble.

Nobody wanted it to come to that - thus Boyd's urgency on the matter, but things were what they were, and this was the background. At present, he took hold of his fighter's twin yokes intuitively alerting the autopilot to give him back control of the ship. Thoughts of the future centered around the old technical sales adage of tracing the components of a computer in order to deliver a total solution with the hope of its inspiration becoming a complete solution.

Boyd was grasping at straws to be thinking along those lines, but sometimes he just needed to simplify his position down to its least common denominator. True he had the makings of a successful salesperson in presentation and persuasion, however the answer seemed to lie in the resourcefulness of his presales acumen to design a custom solution. Follow the keyboard? Follow the money!

It was weird Boyd had been undercover for so long the danger of not being able to pull himself out paled by comparison of what it took to separate himself from a position clamoring for the big fish when the guppy would more than suffice. Again the fighter's computer took up the piloting slack when he removed both hands from the controls in order to type his query into the ship's keyboard on the center console.

"The Power Authority," Boyd smiled before digging in his grips on the twin yokes and blowing out the spark plugs on his fighter, so to speak - enjoying the remainder of a night of soaring across the skies of Dio Qze.



## 02: Two Hats, Same Job

"This is Boyd," he greeted with a winded voice into his Ear-To-Mouth Com on coincidence of him leaping down from the cockpit of his fighter to a crouched landing. Nimbly the Enforcer bounced behind the cover of some dense brush serving as a perimeter for a farm peculiarly tied to the outskirts of the Power Authority.

The office phone from Boyd's investor cover was being forwarded to his Ear-To-Mouth Com while he moonlighted during the day at his black ops workplace. Combat gear adorned him rather than the expensive fashion choices of nice button-down shirts and crisp pressed slacks. The Enforcer was comfortable in the corporate element but uneasy because there was literally nowhere to stash his Triple Action LUNC since the handgun was too large for an ankle holster, and he currently wore two in opposing hip holsters. That was the occupation of a specialist. This job was simple because orders were orders, and a laser pulse would get between any distraction and carrying them out. This was black-and-white, so there were no gray areas of cutthroat politics - only mission objectives to be achieved. This was him in his natural element.

As the fighter took off vertically while swaying the brush underneath the force of its thrusters, the ship turned on target of a surprisingly bright sky (for a synthetic planet) before skipping out the visual range of the near vicinity and into a safer element of airborne stealth. Half-listening Boyd continued the conversation, "Yeah I've got a slight touch of fever. It's high," and worked his way over to a tree marking a southeast corner in accordance of where the front of the Power Authority complex sat

well at a distance from the target location and much to his liking. He took a seat with his back up against its stump and brought his left arm around in front of him in order to access the minicomputer on the wrist portion of his combat gear's sleeve.

Numerous gridded panels of camera angles on the tiny minicomputer screen instanced various different vantage points for Boyd to be able to choose from, and all were in brilliant definition. The Power Authority was constructed like a factory in the middle of a city block. This was why the pasture did not quite seem to fit. Perhaps beautification purposes were the intent of its uncanny landscaping. But the area did not appear to be otherwise bland or industrial - nothing short of clean and glistening with the daylight specter of brightness and warmth. In places where vertical architecture was the norm, the tall buildings often became a dank eyesore, but the high-rise construction of this setting was somewhat artful by how each aerodynamically rounded spire poked at the skyline accentuating it with a futuristic surrealism from an illusion of tapered cutlery. The Enforcer would know having spent as much time skimming over the tops of the skyscrapers as he did.

"Thank you for your concern," Boyd replied of the heartfelt wishes from whoever was on the other end of his communications feed. "Hopefully I'll be back at somewhere near half-strength tomorrow."

Black-gloved fingers tapped about the minicomputer's display to select the panels Boyd most wanted to see. Using the hand gesture of touching the center of the picture he wanted and flicking his thumb and middle finger apart across the screen caused the shot to zoom in and refocus to a clarity indiscernible from standing right across from the object the most hidden of cameras



was capturing. To the west and north sat an accommodating, hybrid assortment of ship ports and parking lot spaces. Shuttles were not overly-sized seeing as though they could fit about ten passengers, so it was not uncommon for them to land right next to a car. Heck it took up less space than a bus with its retractable wings and could reach the other side of Dio Qze in no time, so the challenge of seeking out employment for people living in less populated regions was all but eliminated. For those residing within the immediate city limits, actualized shuttle service alleviated the hassle and congestion of rush hour. One more means of travel being added to the public transportation quagmire made all the difference in this world.

With the outside of the building sufficiently scoped out, Boyd decided to use the voyeuristic eyes of the Space Force in order to check out the inside. But first he needed to end the one-way conversation in his ear, "Sure. Certainly. No it was no trouble. Before I let you go though, was there any answer on my proposal? Maybe it'd be worth my while to come in despite the way I feel. Nothing yet, eh? Okay. Will do. I'll talk to you. Bye."

All of this technological prescience was made possible by the Enforcers' targeting feed that piggybacked off the read-only database from the Space Force's communication beacon network stretching across much of known space like aquatic buoys and connecting up a majority of the universe the way the internet had once connected up Earth. Serving a cherry-picking function, it not only had the ability to see through walls and relay the once thought to be private information all the way back across parsecs with zero latency but also erased the biometric data of Boyd and his accomplices from record so they could not be identified,

located, or tracked via the same methods. It was the ultimate tool for seeing to the task of universal domination. It was the perfect tool, if used sparingly, in espionage for netting strategic advantages. It was the only other tool a black ops agent would never want to leave home without. And it was not working. Shielding.

"So much for the easy way in," Boyd sighed before he switched off a blacked-out panel that was supposed to be an open view of the Power Authority's innards in favor of a data profiler screen which would allow him to start cataloging the building's entrants.

### 03: Angle of Alleviation

A week of surveillance had net the usual details: Personalized blurbs, full names, highest-ranking classifications, immediate relatives, group affiliations, skill sets, any paraphernalia the subjects were particularly fond of, and the always important origins. For Boyd to be successful however, he also needed to track their habits and patterns. And under the watchful eye of the Enforcers, every facet of a person's life was scrutinized to data points that, when interpreted as a part of the larger picture and his own minuscule overarching view, made the Human existence appear to be nothing greater than a collection of machinelike doldrums.

Humbling, as Boyd (too) was a part of the Human race - he began to compare its dearth of existence to the vegetation that had grown up to be much higher than his knees during this short time on recon. Certainly when crouched, the wavy grass and crops met him at chest level. Such accelerated growth was uncanny for just a week's time, but the Enforcer had been there to witness every foot of the evidence like the plant from the desk of his investor cover which always seemed to be leaning in the direction of the office window. He stroked a gloved hand through the density of greens and remained thankful for the increased cover shielding him from visual detection but wondered why a field such as this was not more expressly guarded.

Not that farms required security or anything - outside of an occasional few people who looked more like botanists than pickers when they came around to take soil samples, the only other thing

Boyd ever saw come through this area during the days and nights he spent mulling around its recesses was the cultivator currently rumbling across the plain. That was his cue to leave, so intuitive, one-handed typing on the adequately-sized keyboard to his minicomputer summoned the fighter for the purposes of scooping him up before the heavy machinery had a chance to mow down his position.

After leaping up to catch hold of the hovering fighter's cockpit, Boyd pulled himself inside and quickly got situated with a safety harness and lap belt while the canopy closed. Upon skying away from the scene, the display of the immediate vicinity plastered across his minicomputer now splashed across the screen of the ship's center console with the same quality of clarity. With a continued curiosity, he watched the cultivator's mannerisms intently.

And how peculiar was it the entire area was being shaved with what could be described as a close razor leaving the farm the way Boyd had first found the place: Not quite barren but neat and matted down in the vein of a lawn sheering done during the cooler temperatures of fall weather? The clippings were not being mulched either as the cultivator collected everything before departing in the middle of the night right down the street. Nothing seemed to be out the ordinary concerning this. Dio Qze's main export was its agriculture, so the heavy machinery would probably wind up back at a processing and distribution plant before long. There was no use in tailing the massive haul for the assumption to be proven correct as that was a waste of time plus the wrong angle to be tracing.

Something was up with this farm. The fact Boyd happened to be the only person asking questions about its very existence all but assured it. There were no signs of advanced hydroponics. The

planet was getting very little rainfall at this time of year. No fertilizer had been used over the course of the week, and no compost was left. He was not a botanist in the slightest - more a detective at this point but had to admit the rate of plant growth was insane for zero agricultural assistance. From barren to lush across forty acres in a week's time? No freaking way. But his instruments had recorded every second of it if there was going to be any doubt or a chance the interested party he worked for would not believe him and required explicit proof.

Boyd could barely believe his own eyes, so it behooved him to start narrowing down the field, and that pun was intended. He might not have been a botanist, but his screen was filled with the faces of those he had come across during his week of surveillance. As his fighter hovered above the Power Authority in a holding pattern, the Enforcer picked a random name out the computer - a suitable yet appropriate substitute for a hat and took hold of the twin yokes in order to jet away from the scene. Further research of this selection would happen from the comfort of his penthouse.

## The Power Authority

The mark's name was Janette Ueberrhein, and the comfort of her own apartment would have been a nice gesture at this point rather than the hard desktop of the plywood cubicle currently serving as her pillow. No time and a half was offered or allotted for the overtime hours she worked because the fact the inhabitants of this world were still breathing was compensation enough.

It was no laughing matter, but the cruel joke of Dio Qze was

the planet had already been occupied by the time Galaxy Bloc decided to move in. Its harsh punchline added the need for supporting dual ecosystems to protect one set of inhabitants from the other.

"You've done everything you can," Burdlit Giz - the reptilian (in appearance) Carriveau operational general comforted. "The Deew remains dormant." He only wore enough clothes for the sake of functionality, so his arms, legs, and tail were all openly exposed, but his hand laser was holstered, a laser rifle was slung around his shoulder, and other gear was either loaded into the crevices of the straps crisscrossing his chest and back or belted down into the pouches surrounding his waist.

"But it's not enough," Janette muttered into her elbow. Feature-wise the only thing visible on her body was her head - the face of which was well concealed by her folded forearms. Humans were still a self-conscious race, so a drab lab coat draped across the seat of her chair and shielded any other descriptive features of merit. The view-screen affixed to the botanist's console appeared to highlight various stabilized readings to the untrained eye of a scientific novice like Burdlit, but she was left feeling uneasy nonetheless and pointed out as much while sitting up and swiveling around in the chair to face him, "The Deew's energy demands are not reflected here on my screen because they've grown steadily, but they're really off the nominal charts at this point. We feed it - it sleeps, but it's requiring more and more for this pattern to continue.

I'm almost thinking we need to resort to a trickle-type charge in order to ween the Deew off these constant infusions. It'll be too powerful to flash freeze otherwise. I should've seen this earlier."

Burdlit could see the weariness in Janette's now visible yet haggard and borderline blank facial expression that obviously came from working nonstop hours which continued well after she left the Power Authority, so he suggested, "Get some rest. You'll be able to think more clearly when you come back to it."

Not necessarily nodding her agreement but too tired to argue, Janette disconnected her slate computer from its console connector effectively shutting down her station. After placing the device inside a backpack and taking a codekey in hand from off the desktop, she stood up and turned to face the windows of the massive bowl-shaped command center referred to as Inner Corridor.

Caged within those windows, a gigantic photochromic plant sat where Dio Qze's core was supposed to be and stared back at Janette without any eyes. Burdlit had called it the Deew, but she only knew the thing as her nemesis.





#### 04: Angle of Defense

Not everybody spoke the same language. It would have been pretty presumptuous to believe every person was completely fluent in the Human dialect when, laughably, Humans were about one of the last races to attend the universal dance and boasted far fewer numbers than any other race who had long since been a galactic participant.

The fact of the matter was before the Space Force came around, Humans were the universe's laughing stock. Nobody wanted to invade Earth, subjugate the planet, or destroy it because the comedy was just too great. But rather playful wagers were constantly made in jest as to how long their world could survive without tearing itself apart. Burdlit often wondered who was playing whom during those times.

For Humans to have gone from the self-inflicted blights of so many sectarian squabbles whether geopolitical, regional, or international (all petty to an outside observer) and through the mania of unimpassioned influence-peddling by their best and brightest but altogether (supposedly) authoritative and in the know that never left anybody better off in the short or long term - to owning a quarter of the universe was mind-boggling! It was as if the Space Force knew of Earth's perception and silently built their dominance while the rest of the universe's inhabitants sat around distracted by the shuttle wreck a Human might call society.

No not everybody spoke the same language. And many more were not even on the same page with the Space Force's level of underhandedness that led to an unprecedented rise to power. The

Slorgs? Fine. The most populous race was respected and had a right to call some shots. The Dorans? Okay. The most feared race who made a household name out of ethnic cleansing with a technological ability to convert foreigners to their genetic makeup was assured a seat at the table of clout. The Pillorian Regime? Certainly. Those Ethereals probably built the entire universe, so the faction's freedom to wield will went without saying.

But Humans? No. Never. Unacceptable. The principle of it was just all wrong, and to Burdlit, these were not some minor prejudices. The Space Force was disruptive like a publisher who ignored the style guides of tradition and refused the formulaic approaches of commodity. Simply put, they had no respect for the closed architecture of the clique and churned along irrespective of the grain or their status in quo.

Burdlit and even the Carriveaua at large were jealous of no race. Envy, however, was a completely different emotion. It was the difference between realizing what one did not have and feeling sorry for oneself measured against recognizing what one did not yet have but then doing something about stemming the deficit. So were these concerns warranted? Absolutely they were. Look at what the Space Force had achieved in decades when it took all other races aeons to carve out but only meager portions of the universe. His people wanted in.

So no not everybody spoke the same language. However technology like Ear-To-Mouth Coms from the Space Force's corporate offshoot, Ennead Tech Corp, made it not only possible but feasible for every being throughout the universe to be able to at least communicate with one another. A powerful device in its own rite, the insane collection of translation codex encompassing all dialects (not most or many - all) gave them an insufferable

competitive advantage by taking away everybody else's!

So devious and yet so earnest, the only time the Space Force ever seemed to subscribe to standards was when those initiatives held a homogenizing effect that could better the universe by uplifting its masses to a more level playing field. Burdlit witnessed this previously with the advent of their communication beacon network which had revolutionized universal communications until Ennead Tech Corp put the stamp on this culmination of advances with a stranglehold - namely the Ear-To-Mouth Com. As a result of the trendsetter advantages, people could no longer live without the ability to communicate universally, and the Humans had technological credibility to go along with their military strength.

The irony of it all was Burdlit could not go one day without thinking negative thoughts about Humans. After seeing Janette off to the elevator that would lead her back to the surface of Dio Qze, he turned around to an Inner Corridor filled with the rest of them (whom) he had to deal with on a daily basis and who each humbly deferred to his extensive experience in and knowledge on dealing with the presence of Deews - the way it should be.

The Carriveaua could have never gotten away with this type of deception at the level of a Space Force-aligned world, but these unincorporated planets of Galaxy Bloc could not secede away from their faction of origin fast enough. And they did so right into the waiting arms of Burdlit and those like him who were more than willing to lend helping hands under the cover of offering a potential, new ally a head start. Unfortunately for them, these foolish Humans were to be the way in he was seeking that could allow his associates to unleash a sinister delivery system which would destroy the Space Force from within.

How was that for reestablishing one's dominance? Destroying

a megapower - the thought of which brought back the smile to Burdlit's scaly lips. The Carriveaua were once on the cusp of heralding the very faction spot the Space Force now coveted (read: stole), and they wanted it back - willing to take their respect along with it in the process.

Taking a pass on the elevator, Burdlit opted for the stairs as the exercise did his already muscularly fit and trim build well. He lived in quarters only one floor up from this lowest level of the Power Authority, so being overly slothful did not bode well for the advisory role of his employment. Generally revered by the Humans as being some sort of suave weapons expert tasked with stopping the Deew at all costs the scientists likely could not afford, it was imperative for him to maintain this charming outer exterior at all times if the unassuming guise were to remain intact.

The emotion of everything aside, the Space Force really was a danger to the rest of the universe. Galaxy Bloc might not have bought into the impending war sob story, but the Carriveaua knew the warning to be factually accurate and were going to leverage the hesitancy of all these unincorporated planets throughout the faction's midst in order to hit the unsuspecting megapower where it hurt.

Peace rarely seemed to follow wherever the Space Force went, and it was idiotic to believe an intergalactic war would just be between them and the New Alliance. Interstellar conflicts always had a way of spilling out damage in collateral directions, and this was becoming a sickening pattern of their faction. First the Slogrs. Now the Dorans. Who was next? The Ethereals? The Carriveaua would not put it past them, so these egregious acts of entanglement could not simply be passed over.

Upon entering plush quarters of a stained wood grain ambience, Burdlit set aside his laser rifle leaning it up against the imitation leather couch that sat parallel to three-quarters of the cabin's walls and defined the entertainment center area. Yes the Humans took good care of their honored guest. His tail, normally kept taut when dealing with them so as to keep up the aforementioned tight appearance, now slithered more freely as he worked his way down one side of the subtle three step drop and up the other side forming a pseudo pit complete with a coffee table made of metal and glass in its center.

Coffee. That sounded like a good idea right about now - Burdlit thought. Once out the entertainment center area, he entered the more functional portion of his quarters featuring an office toward the right and the normal amenities like a bedroom and kitchen to the left. All the furniture was constructed in the metal and glass style, and each of the inner walls to the cabin were see-through. As personal as a preference got, the color scheme made it easier for him to blend in with his surroundings, and warriors were always looking for ample opportunities to showcase their varied abilities. Practice made perfect in any culture, and the perfection of guile was more a mantra than a trait at this point.

Drawn to the coffee machine sitting atop Burdlit's desk in the office for all those long nights of late work or pleasant evenings of curling up with an eBook from his all-time favorite - the Domina series, he had become quite fond of (read: addicted to) that liquid mixture with the French vanilla creamer. Well these Humans managed to get one thing right.



## 05: The Thought that Smarts

Janette's routine was simple: Come early, stay late, leave work, go home and work even more. Her dedication was abundant, but the schedule signaled desperation. When things were going well, people did not normally need to put in so many hours, but when things were not going so well, the extra hours represented the only way for them to remain afloat. Drowning under the crushing waves of the daily grind was nothing new but increasingly peculiar for a non-commission position. Was she applying for a grant or bidding for some other type of funding - a research contract perhaps?

After a week of studying Janette, Boyd had no idea, and at this moment, he really did not care. Loitering directly outside the entrance to the Power Authority with an unlit cigarette dangling between his lips and a trench coat masking the suspect details of his combat gear, the Enforcer awaited the timing of clockwork. All for keeping schedules, maintaining prioritization, and priding oneself on organization, he was here to say the rigors of routine were a predator's dream. But of the patterned proof, these next actions would be doing the talking for him.

Boyd did not smoke, but he was not above using those (from the pool of the third shift) who did as cover. Public smoking bans had been in effect for decades across the universe, so the people huddled around the entrance waiting for others of their brethren to join them on the long trek out across the west and north parking lots - banished to the furthest reaches of the property where they could consume their shared addiction in approved locations.

No judgment was being passed by Boyd because these people

were really not any different than the coffee crowd, the snack machine crowd, or even the watercooler crowd. What they were, however, was on time. Addictive cravings also beget an exploitable routine.

Shielding Boyd's presence by the emergence of the boisterous camaraderie bursting through those once locked Power Authority entrance doors, no mind was paid to him as the people went about their business allowing the intended unawares so he could go about continuing his. Rushing the doors was not going to be a way in the Enforcer would probably be allowed to walk away from with either his life or cover intact, but the timer on the minicomputer was counting down the next piece of a preplanned option that had the potential to complete this infiltration puzzle.

For once, the problems could not be attributed to the government. This time around, it was the fault of the developers who saw the potential of Dio Qze's water-ice content for a sale, disregarded the vegetational crevice featuring a Deew, and ignored the initial warning signs from the missing and dead first colonizers with a fully terraformed cover-up.

On the contrary, Galaxy Bloc had been quick to respond when they learned about the 'issue' lying beneath the surface. There was no hint of pride or time to place blame when needing to call in outside help from the likes of Burdlit, and Janette was just fine with that. He did not get all into the scientific aspects of everything because she was more than qualified to deal with those matters, so they worked well together.

In Janette's eyes, Burdlit was more of a facilitator and, where that did not work, a warrior. When she needed custom builds of antiquated and expensive portable nuclear power generators



brought in to help satiate the Deew without having to sap the planet's dwindling reserves, he got Galaxy Bloc to make it happen. Synthetic worlds like Dio Qze usually did not reside within traditional solar systems, so no centralized sun existed as an energy source.

If the vile Deew started to sprout and grow out of control, Janette's impression of Burdlit was he would do his military best to have a bonfire at the core with that plant. Initially nobody even noticed the vegetational crevice because it functioned like a core, but the growing yearn to replenish its own energy reserves by eventually seeking out alternative sources became the fodder which caused nightmares to have pleasant dreams.

The elevator ride from Inner Corridor on up to the surface had Janette in a daze of contemplation - so much so that when she turned the corner upon exiting the entrance to the Power Authority, the botanist accidentally collided with a man walking along the sidewalk. Previously fascinated by thoughts of the past and future, this startling jolt shook her back to a focus on the here and now.

"Oh my fault!" The man cried almost chivalrously as he labored downward in his trench coat to help pick up Janette's gear that went flying during the unusually blunt impact.

Needing to be careful here, Boyd had blurted out his apology almost prematurely of him turning the corner and walking forcefully into Janette to cause the collision that jarred the botanist's backpack loose from her.

"No worries," Janette said accepting the apology while watching Boyd kneel down awkwardly in his trench coat to pick up the gear and hand it to her. Almost in stride of the incident

occurring, she was right back on her way.

With the belongings retrieved, Janette shook off the occurrence and kept on moving. Venturing into the brisk evening air, she would reach the destination of a high-rise living unit in less than six city blocks worth of walking distance.

It was not long after Janette arrived at home and noticed the codekey she had been holding loosely in her left hand was no longer there. Where was her head as of late? Oh right, trying to figure out how to save the planet from the voracious Deew.

Fortunately codekeys were tied to GPS, so Janette could track the location of hers from her slate computer. Unfortunately chivalry was absent because she could not have left the Power Authority without it, and yet its movement was now inside the complex heading down toward a destination of Inner Corridor! "That son of a bitc-."

The intent was for Boyd to project a gentlemanly trait that would deflect attention away from the purpose which was to swipe Janette's codekey. Nevertheless his ultimate prize became unforced entry into the Power Authority.

The Power Authority

"Worthless Human."

"What was that, Burdlit?" Janette's voice came back over his Ear-To-Mouth Com.

He thought the sentiment was successfully muttered but soon found himself stumbling across his words in order to recover from an ill-advised personal opinion, "Uh - I uh, we'll let you in." Even to Burdlit, it seemed unclear as to whether the original reference pertained to Janette who he generally liked or the intruder that stole her codekey.

Of the snafu, she seemed to be surprisingly more infuriated than apologetic, "I can't believe that guy. I'm on my way back now - five minutes out." Her voice fluttered as it kept in tune with the pace of a brisk jog, "Throw everything you've got at him."

Open target practice on a Human? Burdlit did not need to be told twice as he collected his laser rifle from where it leaned against the arm of the couch on the way out his quarters and pleasantly acknowledged, "Yes, Ma'am."

A pair of double doors forming the street level entrance to the Power Authority slid closed behind Boyd. Although he came prepared with a couple undetectable LUNC's, a successful stint throughout this complex meant not having to use either of them. The unusually thick presence of Galaxy Bloc troops far and away outnumbered the amount of regular workers, but neither of those

groups were on his side, so remaining covert made a whole lot more sense than becoming confrontational.

The Power Authority featured a main area accounting for the bulk of the four-story complex from what Boyd had been allowed to see on the outside. The building featured window placements across those four stories. Scaffolding could be seen throughout, so heights could be reached. But for the most part, he stood within one massive floor. Not uncommon to synthetic planets in the slightest, large and powerful transformers were normally plugged into a planet's core for the purposes of tapping a near infinite power source and converting the energy to something consumers could use. There would almost assuredly be at least three more of these types of facilities around the surface of Dio Qze.

As Boyd meandered about the area, he could hear the pulsating hum of monstrous metallic structures, cooling fans, and their associative circuitry at work. It was a maze of cylindrical and rectangular infrastructure with railing for separation between units, step ladders for immediate ease of access to individual areas, and efficient floor direction of painted arrows or clear section markings taking the place of hanging or posted signage. Being more a generalist in terms of physics, his real expertise belonged to observation. The minicomputer continued to take note of any variances and record everything else for him so he could deliver the information to one of the Enforcers' technological gurus. They could sort the rest out at a later date.

None of the normal personnel or the military raised any bit of an objection to Boyd's presence because for him to have even been inside the complex, it must have meant he belonged there. But Janette's realization her codekey had been swiped was going to threaten to wear out his welcome, so he sought out the nearest

elevator he could find from one of the many kiosk-style placements where they resided along the floor and sauntered inside again behaving like he was well within his rights to have done so.

Security measures did not change oh so dramatically from organization to organization or culture to culture, so of that natural agreement, Burdlit stood within a huddle of Galaxy Bloc soldiers advising them of their next moves. He kept the circle of information small by only authorizing placements and subtle changes in positioning as a part of what could be described as a silent sweep. By the time the intruder became aware of the dragnet, the person would have already been ensnared by the trap.

Woefully inadequate was what came to mind when Boyd thought about Galaxy Bloc's attempts. It was a subject whose core warmed his heart and played dangerously close to the root of his occupation, but this sham of pacing patrols could not be referred to as 'security'. In seceding away from the Space Force, the unincorporated planets had succeeded in rejecting real protection. He literally just walked up into the Power Authority and was leisurely taking a ride all the way down as far as Janette's clearance would allow. If this were any Space Force-aligned planet, a detail of troops would be waiting for him when he stepped out the elevator with open firearms. But because these planets like Dio Qze rejected the so-called invasive measures of biometric scans and DNA Recognition/Authorization satiating their nonsensical approach to privacy concerns as a result, the Enforcer could have blown the place up two times over before anybody inside even realized there was problem. About the only thing they could track was the codekey, and he had reached his destination quickly so as

to not allow it to become a factor.

"We've got a bead on the perpetrator," a Galaxy Bloc soldier announced from a crouched position while referencing a layout of the Power Authority on her slate computer.

"Excellent," Burdlit said as he moved to position himself over the shoulder of the soldier. His left first finger went to trace along the screen and follow the upward path of a pinpointed elevator, but this particular movement did not sit well with him. "It's a decoy."

The underground levels were depicted in alphabetical order beginning with the letter 'A' as the highest point, but they did not start at Dio Qze's crust. This put the trajectory of the elevator on path for the middle part of the alphabet as it ascended through a twenty-six level apportionment of the planet's lower mantle. A secondary facility was constructed around the core, so the length of the journey took about ten minutes to reach that location where the lettered labels finally kicked in. Between Janette's recognizing her codekey had gone missing and Burdlit mobilizing to get the soldiers in place, at least one trip - almost the length of the world's radius could have been made all the way down to the lowest recesses of the facility.

And what secrets the core housed - Burdlit did not even want to think about that. On paper, the task of running the intruder into his soldiers seemed quite simple, but in reality, carrying it out might not be so easy. There were too many levels to cover, four polar vectors in accordance of an additional three power stations to complete a quad worth of escape routes, and he only had enough troops to fully saturate two levels on a wild guess.

They were unprepared because this breach was unprecedented.

Who in their right mind would break into a power company? On Carriveau worlds, Burdlit's people had reason to do so because the power was nowhere near as stable as it was on Dio Qze featuring frequent outages of the lengthy, unexplained variety. In that instance, what really bothered him (and a whole host of others) was not so much the fact the power continued to go out incessantly so much as it was the understanding their right to complain had been taken away. For as treasonous as the thought sounded, they then had the right to revolt against a government-controlled customer service catastrophe. These spoiled Humans could not relate.

Outside the person having an unfortunate set of instabilities that could wind up coinciding with termination, there was always the possibility this intrusion might have been professional in nature. The Carriveau and Galaxy Bloc shared a mutual enemy in the Space Force, but seriously how much damage could one attacker do? Famous last words. Being more of a generalist in terms of sociology, his real expertise belonged to project management, so he fingered his Ear-To-Mouth Com in order to rally the troops, "I need the four security teams to split up: Half of each should provide a perimeter defense around the surface of every topside entrance. For the remainder: Power Authority North, head to Inner Corridor. Power Authority East, begin a level by level search starting with Level A. Power Authority South, randomize your search." The operational general paused the secure broadcast to ask the soldier beside him, "Can you stop the elevator inside Level 0?"

She nodded and typed about the face of the slate computer to make that happen.

"Power Authority West," Burdlit finished ordering, "head directly to Level 0. We'll be transmitting the exact coordinates

of the elevator in question." He waited for the soldier's mark.

At the conclusion of her work, she cradled the slate computer away, stood up, and looked over to say, "Sent."

Satisfied with the initial flurry of maneuvers but ultimately disappointed with their reactiveness, Burdlit turned to a contingent of ten soldiers, unslung the laser rifle from his shoulder, and belted out, "Let's move," in hopes of turning around this early bout of misfortune.



It was interesting how the high level of coordination for the trap led to increased levels of frustration when the resultant failure to nab the intruder arose. Inner Corridor was thankfully secured, but the person did not turn up there. The doors to a halted elevator in Level 0 opened up to a line of laser rifle-toting soldiers, but its only occupant was Janette's codekey wedged into the slot underneath the button panel and five potted plants which looked exactly like the ones adorning the lobbies of the entrances to every floor! The bad but expected news was delivered to Burdlit's contingent shortly after they left the outside of his quarters charging down the corridors of Level Z for the start of their own entry into the hunt.

"The intruder was able to account for the weight sensors," the soldier with the slate computer alerted. Elevators needed an actual weighted body in order to be operated from the inside. "Five potted plants at about twenty pounds a piece were more than enough to trigger the accepted variance for that unattended return trip."

"This just means the intruder is now trapped within the Power Authority," Burdlit put a positive spin to a dreadful piece of news. The person could have been anywhere at this moment and probably was - everywhere his contingent was not. Although the importance of keeping up appearances of control during this situation was of the utmost paramount concern to him because they were dealing with a professional who could lurk about without being seen and would most likely be capable of doing some serious damage

to the workers, soldiers, and facility if tested. "Pinpoint the stops."

Additional information began to flood into the soldier's slate computer, so she elaborated on those findings, "No good. Every floor from A through Z was stopped on at least once. For the return trip, Z through O were each touched again. The intruder could be -"

Burdlit interrupted her, "Don't even say it as I've already thought about that. Let's focus on a level by level search." His next set of private thoughts were questioning why the security cameras did not appear to be catching up to a series of bold movements by this intruder.

Inside a darkened, unattended Level Z conference room, Boyd watched Burdlit's contingent march down the corridor from beneath the room's windows and their closed blinds seated with his back against the wall. A totality of Galaxy Bloc troop movements played out beautifully across a split screen of panels on his minicomputer as the enhanced vision of the Power Authority cameras now belonged to him. But this appropriated aid of surveillance was not the only thing he possessed.

Janette happened to be much more than some regular botanist who worked a normal shift and then went home to live a simple life. Her individual security clearance was among the highest Boyd had ever come across on any of the unincorporated planets he worked to this point. She held actual rank within Galaxy Bloc, and for the moment, the perks of that status belonged to him including authorization to view the cameras, a useful set of layout plans mapping out a good majority of the area which just finished uploading to his minicomputer, and continued physical access to any

part of the Power Authority.

All of this was preventable. All of it! And the common sense measures were easy to implement. The Space Force did not tie authorization to a codekey, and even though plain, tamperproof identification cards were still used, the determining factor as to whether the supposedly authorized party happened to be accepted or not was the person's biometrics. Electronic identities could be much more easily assumed than biological attributes, and old radio-frequency identification skimming technology plus the physical exertion from dragging potted plants all over the place proved this. The privacy advocates were right to be concerned about governments putting chips in everything but for the wrong reason: A government might very well have had noble intentions, but rival factions did not, so rudimentary technology such as codekeys could be exploited like credit cards.

One single instance of DNA Recognition/Authorization could have stopped Boyd's entire incursion at the front door. Now his minicomputer had already deciphered the basic encryption to the Power Authority's shielding allowing him to become a ghost in the network and a veritable specter within the complex like he was on the outside. Galaxy Bloc was being stubborn, and the Enforcer felt justified in his previous, continued, and future actions to save the unincorporated planets from themselves by not allowing this stubbornness to bring down the greater war effort at large.

If anybody thought the Space Force was being overzealous in their assertions, Boyd was there to tell the universe its undermining had already begun. He noticed Burdlit and quickly began to pull any Power Authority files on the operational general. The Carriveaua were friends to no Human. With one commanding troops deep within Dio Qze, something was definitely up with the

suggestive presence. Of course, Galaxy Bloc would have known this had it not vehemently disregarded one hundred percent of the warnings the Enforcer's faction repeatedly issued.

As such, breaking into the Power Authority was turning out to be increasingly more fruitful than Boyd once believed it ever could have been. This Carriveaua angle was one worth pursuing. The peculiarities of the agriculture on Dio Qze and Janette's weighty involvement were others.

## 08: The Personal Side of Business

An all-out sprint had slowed to a moderate power walk when Janette pushed her way through the base of a perimeter defense that saw the southern street plus the north and west parking lots gummed up from the presence of Galaxy Bloc's mobile Treaders - utility vehicles which combined a nimble front tire turning radius with rear tank treads and twin, connected rooftop auto-turrets. Without the credentials she had so highly coveted so as to misplace them and cause this entire mess, any sudden movements aside from the urgent, expeditious variety might have been met with impediment by an allotment of foot soldiers providing a dense buffer up against the Power Authority entrance with laser rifles poised and at the ready. Aerial Wingers, the prototype one-person power gliders, circled overhead and kept watch over the night sky as well as the pasture to the east.

"Who's in charge here?" Janette asked the first soldier she came across among the bustling conglomerate. All of them had a methodical purpose as they scrambled to go about handling it. Each was refined and efficient in seriousness and movement but green by comparison of an unrecognized threat that became a long overdue yet unwanted test in the assessment of their militaristic competencies.

"You are," a soldier correctly answered the trick question, "Ma'am."

There was no need for credentials and no need for Burdlit to buzz Janette in because all the soldiers were well aware of her face and rank. From living within the shadow of the Space Force and the dominion of its control over the Quadron System, the

unincorporated planets had been granted a measure of a pass when it came to approaching dangers. But Galaxy Bloc never stopped preparing via an intense training regimen and impressive tooling of proliferation for these randomized hazards that might have and eventually (as with this very evening) wound up falling in their lap. Protection by association would only last for so long before somebody attempted to challenge the well-publicized secession.

Whether this current act of aggression was being carried out by the hands of an embarrassed Space Force attempting to save face and repair a damaged pride with onerous and smothering demands for formalizing those extended protections or any number of third parties located throughout the universe seeking to do Galaxy Bloc overt harm, Janette had no clue. What she did know was the soldier's preprogrammed response happened to be as pleasing to her ears as it was absent from Burdlit's. The Carriveaua had their place and were useful to the purpose of assisting the unincorporated planets in achieving a measure of continued sovereignty, but this help came as a result of an uncanny knowledge about Deews. The soldier's affirmation merely acknowledged the fact the operational general and his people could be dealt with, as well, in the event of a double cross.

Of the soldier's response, Janette stated, "Excellent," before fingering her Ear-To-Mouth Com in order to page Burdlit and alert him of her arrival.

"Yes, Janette," Burdlit answered in stride of his dash up the stairwell between Level Z and Level Y, "you made it." He chose to take the lead with his contingent in tow, so (in their following) they remained noticeably mindful of the space the operational general's thick tail occupied as it spiraled up the

staircase behind him.

"Yeah," Janette replied, "I'm topside and about to head down to Inner Corridor."

While snapping open the door to Level Y, Burdlit questioned, "Are you sure that's necessary," and allowed two members of his contingent to rush out into the level before charging through the doorway himself. These were classic infantry tactics meant to provide a leapfrogging continuation of cover as the remainder of the soldiers soon flooded inside, next, to watch his back. The operational general had done well to contain the fallout with proper troop positioning, but he had not yet secured the scene, so there was an honest concern for Janette's safety. Her either falling hostage or victim to the intruder was sarcastically all they needed right about now.

A grown woman of civilian department, Janette often needed to assuage the fears of the military-minded, "I intend on taking some soldiers with me. I'll be fine." She then prefaced her desire to be closer to the action with, "It's just when you get this guy, I'd like to be present."

"As you wish," Burdlit sighed at his acquiescence to yet another example of the foolhardy Human ego on display. He continued off down the corridor leading this time with the barrel of his laser rifle out in front.

After selecting a ten-soldier contingent of her own, Janette hustled toward the Power Authority entrance doors lugging only a

right-shouldered backpack and no weapon. She had faith in Burdlit's methods, but her very eyes received even greater trust. This intruder was something different. It would be doubtful if mere guns were capable of bringing the person down, so the botanist brought a measure of ingenuity to the hunt.

A very personal violation had been inflicted upon Janette, and this ran much more deeply than a stolen codekey. It was a cut that burned and seethed within the wound, so she made no mistake of an intended malice. Her life - her personal being, her privacy had been scoped out, invaded, and exploited. For how long? Weeks. Months. Possibly years.

Janette was to have been used up and discarded like toilet paper, and the thought of life not being precious did not surprise her in the slightest, but the realization this intruder had pried into hers while out the view of the public sickened her to no end. Sleeping. In the shower. Other blush-worthy personal time. She shrugged that last thought away and only hoped the pervert had been given quite a show.

This screamed of the Space Force's doing. And this type of comportment was the real reasoning behind why Galaxy Bloc exited from their dominion. Absolutely nothing remained sacred from their eyes.

Or their ears - as Boyd would tell it. Part of a sinister three-way call sixty-six percent of the participants believed was secure, he had heard Janette's aims as surely as he had listened to the Level Y stairwell door shut with its reverberant echo two levels above where the Enforcer currently stood facing the entrance to Inner Corridor.



## 09: Eye-Opener, Game-Changer

If there was such a thing as a level within a level, Inner Corridor was it. The other twenty-six levels from A through Z were bunched together as what Boyd would have initially imagined to be the majority of the Power Authority's surface area, but this was horribly far from an actual truth that saw the lowest twenty-seventh level as a circumferential depth enveloping the entire core of Dio Qze.

For as far as Boyd had gotten utilizing hacked access to the maps of the Power Authority, he found the nosy view of his enhanced gaze was again blocked out from him. Whether this occurrence had to do with interference from the core or reinforced shielding seemed unclear at the moment. What was clear happened to be the idea those on the other side of this door would be in the same boat with regard to blinded navigation, but the advantage still belonged to the Enforcer. The status of him playing the part of a virtual specter had never been relinquished, and with a playing field about to become even wider, the house could no longer be said to hold any sort of advantage that would normally have come as a bonus from its home court familiarity.

An intricate ventilation shaft system was about the last piece of information Boyd could ascertain from this immediate vicinity before all further intel beyond the doors was blanked out from the prying eyes of his minicomputer. The ducts were located everywhere along this last leg of Level Z: At his feet, high above his head, running through and along the walls. Tempting as the idea was to traverse this network in order to retain an ultra

secrecy, he thought better of the caveats. And there were several of them running through his mind at this point. Some were obvious like the possibility of getting turned around, lost, and trapped. Others might have appeared to be sneaky had the Enforcer not considered the implications and instead fallen into their mercy like the question of what was actually being piped through this infrastructure. It was clear how he needed to proceed next.

Boyd swung open the door to Inner Corridor.

Much to the surprise of two Galaxy Bloc soldiers whose job it was to secure the entrance, they witnessed not the unmasked face of a wanted intruder but the buzz saw of an aggressor who sought to mar any recognition of facial characteristics with the uncertainty coming from unconsciousness. After all, this was the type of thing the unincorporated planets felt could be handled without the aid of the Space Force, so these troops should have welcomed the test and relished the challenge.

To kill or not to kill, there was not even a question. Boyd charged through the doorway and launched into guerrilla-based tactics with a clear intent to incapacitate - not slay. Two knocked out soldiers would cause two more to have to come to their aid and look after them netting a total of four troops no longer looking for him. Taking the time to do the math added up exponentially in the positive when considering an equation of patience.

Truthfully Boyd could easily lay this entire place down a thousand times over with the million laser pulse capacity within just one of his LUNC's, and he carried two of those handguns. But this would make the soldiers' job of finding him that much simpler because he would have laid out the cards of an established intent which could allow them to delay tending to the already dead in

favor of attending to the matter of tracking the Enforcer down. With confusion and what he considered to be an earnest and fair amount of compassion for enlisted troops only following orders, additional breathing room would be achieved. Besides what was the point of his pursuers settling in on his purpose when he had not yet even ascertained this little tidbit for himself?

Good with his gloved hands, Boyd used his left hand to knock the laser rifle of the first out of position soldier (from the immediate foreground) aside before following through with a right hand punch to the troop's face that spun the stunned person twirling forward into a thoughtful yet purposeful grasp. Holding up the slumping individual whose eyes were watering as the result of an impactful sting originating from the base of an almost broken nose, he now possessed a Human shield with which to leverage the taking down of the person's partner.

The other soldier fumbled around a bit in order to ready the second laser rifle of this match, but there was just no shot. Now the weapon might not have been as powerful as a LUNC but was far from a pushover. However in this case of the troop's partner being between the barrel and intruder, it was completely useless.

Always the opportunist, Boyd took advantage of the situation by thrusting his hostage forward - causing the remaining soldier to react by the instinctive default of a flinch in catching the person and caring enough not to see a partner fall helplessly to the floor plus the potential of further bodily detriment. What the troop wound up seeing was stars after the Enforcer launched into a spinning jump kick over the top of a two body mass that had now become a crumple of the pain-induced slumber variety. Upon touching back down with both feet and the flare of his trench coat settling into the drape of its normal hem, he was quick to locate

both laser rifles, confiscate the weapons, and discard them in the nearest closet - anyplace outside the open where they could have been readily retrieved.

With communications stymied by whatever was going on in the area, it would not take much time for the savvy to just step into the stairwell and call for reinforcements. Boyd hurried down the rest of the way through this corridor and dashed inside a massive bowl-shaped command center before ducking around into a maze of cubicles and stalking his way toward the room's epicenter via a randomized path guided by adrenaline rather than instinct. Soldiers were everywhere throughout this location. He now found himself leaning with his back up against the plywood walls of somebody's desk - crouched down but in an optimized position to be able to move once a wave of yet another set of paired-together troops marched along its opposite side. The only thing that mattered to him was the chance to see what all the military fuss surrounding this place was about. His minicomputer continued to record any findings albeit at an interestingly limited distance from its normally unmatched and unrestricted data capture range.

A belly crawl would have been too slow plus clumsy. Boyd swung around and set about the swiftness of a sprinter's dash from their famed start position in order to fly past the aisleway that had just been patrolled without those soldiers being any the wiser. Tightening spaces abounded as he weaved his way in, out, around, and between the crevices of what appeared to have been an entire floor of office space. Nimble the Enforcer hopped over a wastebasket lying beside the closed drawers to a two-foot (high) filing cabinet - somewhat sticking out in the middle of the aisle. He also provided extra lift to make sure his trench coat cleared the obstacle in doing so.

It was imperative to not only be quick on his feet but light as well because stomping about the rows of cubicles, like an open admission of him barging in, would have been just as bad as taking out that wastebasket back there. Boyd turned a corner into what felt like the most centrist portion of the room and pressed his back up against the side wall of another cubicle serving as an endcap to its row. Seemingly without getting turned around, the Enforcer's sense of direction compensated for the lack of his minicomputer's directional coordination. In eventually needing to navigate the way back toward the entrance to Inner Corridor for escape, it had better not have been a fluke ability. Getting out was going to be a whole lot tougher than breaking in, and the visitor would then wind up losing a previously enjoyed advantage to the house.

Ironically simple snooping around was becoming tricky as well. Boyd made a quick check of the peripheral view by turning his head from side to side in order to peer down the open-aired and circular, track-like corridor. He felt as if the whole area mirrored the inner ring portion of a disc by its rounded construction. This was fine. Galaxy Bloc's comfort in building functionality was of no concern to him.

But the part bothering Boyd most was what he saw when he turned around to face forward and ventured across from his current position on over to the windows forming the furthest inward point of Inner Corridor. It had already been ascertained earlier in his thoughts he was not a botanist, but the Enforcer was not an engineer either. Being this deep within a synthetic planet, many people from across the universe were afforded an opportunity to take a field trip down to the extended containment array that held the particle-accelerated remnants of a collapsed star reignited to

form the world's core and sole means of a power source.

So where was it? Was this why the presence of Galaxy Bloc soldiers was so thick? Who cultivated such a monstrous and energy dense plant that it could circumvent Dio Qze's primary power demands for a real core? When could this have ever occurred? What in the universe was going on down here?

Again Boyd was no engineer, but how was this even possible? He should have seen it from the troops' formations. To say they were not at all concerned about him was too liberal an interpretation in stating his imminent threat level, but the Enforcer was definitely of a secondary concern for them.

Clearly their aim was meant to keep whatever that was on the opposite side of this window in.

## 10: Not Even Trying

The minicomputer continued to record while Boyd stood by in astonishment - in silence, stunned by the revelation of a homegrown threat nesting not only beneath the surface of Dio Qze but right under the nose of the Space Force. He happened to be staring down the explanation behind the uncanny agricultural overgrowth topside, but this answer was indistinguishable from the further questions it elicited. And yet, time had not frozen for him as the Enforcer continued to lock eyes with fate during an intermission of mutual sizing up that allowed the many pursuers to catch up to his position.

They would meet again, but Boyd was sincerely hoping the reunion would be with him aboard SpaceStation Konxerus watching as its Mulgulous Weapon obliterated the planet, and he was almost positive the plant knew. Nothing could grow to the size of a planet's core and the prominence of an (only) imaginable strength and not know. Like any other living being, this abomination was going to do whatever it needed to do in order to survive and thrive. Taking a cue from the instincts of an unrecognized entity, the Enforcer reached his right hand inside the trench coat and took hold of the butt of the LUNC oppositely holstered facing outward on his left hip.

What was Galaxy Bloc thinking? Or worse yet planning? Figuring these questions out hinged on Boyd's impending survival, so an overhead unveiling of the LUNC allowed him to hold the handgun comfortably in a grasp at the end of an extended right arm along his shoulder level and the charging soldiers at bay. He sent

laser pulses in their direction causing each of them to scatter back behind the timely cover from within the aisles of cubicles as the offense-minded energy projectiles ate up the direct pathway between him and his pursuers' initial approach by tearing chunks out the carpeted floor. True he was not a sharpshooter, but those were merely warning shots. They proved the point the Enforcer did not even need to get close in order to do some serious damage.

LUNC's were their own arsenal. And only the Space Force possessed access to the powerful handgun, so this was something the Galaxy Bloc soldiers had never seen before. From the intensity of the collective reaction in evading its defense-minded attempts, Boyd recognized caution in his pursuers' advances but wondered where the same apprehension applied to the massive alien plant on the other side of the window. Was this only pride at work here? He sought to test out that theory.

Certainly a well-known generalization by the Space Force about the inhabitants of the unincorporated planets was they appeared to be both stubborn and hardheaded, but Boyd began to wonder if these people were also stupid. His minicomputer was managing short-range biometric scans much more easily within the radius of this bowl-shaped area, so it gave him the chance to track the paces of a mounting opposition. The on-screen map utilized an adaptable piecemeal renderer that built its atlas from the ground up in the rare times like these when Solstice Satellite's prying eyes could not provide the topographical data straight to a user's fingertips. Each area he traversed within Inner Corridor would then be added to an inversely-assembled puzzle - the conglomerate of which continued to be unveiled with forward progress. Similar to the limitations of the enhanced sight being whatever locations were previously uncovered, his gauge of Galaxy Bloc soldier numbers



was as equally skewed in a conservative short of anemic estimation. But it did not matter because they could see him.

Whether by a simple visual confirmation ducking in and out from around the cover of a cubicle or by being made privy to the potential decryption codes that could free any computer-aided eyesight from the looming blackout surrounding this immediate area, it did not matter. The fact of the matter was wherever they lurked, Boyd's simple maneuver of placing his right arm across his chest in pointing the LUNC toward the window standing between the plant and this bowl-shaped area caught the attention of those he could see and caused them to stop in their tracks. Assumption stood a pretty good chance of being correct if its angle concerned the others throughout the remainder of this massive Inner Corridor also being halted. Offering the earlier demonstration of the handgun's abilities left everybody's mind (including his own) to ponder how the weapon would fare against the divider apparently keeping the rest of the planet safe from a weird botanical core.

These people turned out to not be stupid after all, and this was supported by their response to Boyd's sudden re-aiming of his LUNC to be able to fire off a few pulses through the rows of plywood cubicles surrounding his position aided by the handgun being paired with his minicomputer for segmentation targeting purposes. No he was not a sharpshooter, but the built-in governor that prevented him from hitting unwanted targets (such as the Galaxy Bloc soldiers) sure made it seem like he was one. Sparks from exploded workstations burst outward and dust from the rest of the obliterated workspace spewed upward under the strain of unforgiving lasers. With the resonance of a jarring sound emanating from incoming laser fire and echoing away to a past tense, the carnage began to subside into a tepid devastation while

the troops fell back and settled upon new positions. Just to make sure nobody among them got any bright ideas of wanting to become a hero, the Enforcer retrained the barrel of his LUNC on the window. He was in complete control of their actions again causing them to freeze, pause, or at least hesitate some. This meant the entire situation was completely controlled by him.

Not one to leave his own fate up to the graces of what seemed like an alien biological weapon from a novice albeit skeptical perspective, Boyd's combat gear came equipped with gauntlet technology capable of creating a personal shield out a person's life force energy. Should matters have come down to him becoming reckless with the LUNC and opening up the plant's direct access to the rest of the planet via a lightly coordinated agitation with the most powerful handgun in all the universe (read: shooting at it), he might or might not have been protected from whatever its unknown effects were until his fighter could swoop in to retrieve him for a possibility of escaping Dio Qze. But that was a big 'if' and an even bigger gamble leaving the Enforcer without the requisite knowledge which could aid the Space Force in potentially pinpointing anymore of these uncanny botanical instances or launching an assault to cut them off at their presumptive Carriveaua source. In this situation, he had the power but really only because of the ability to leverage these seemingly insurmountable advantages was derived from using his brain to outwit the Galaxy Bloc masses hunting him. Mind over muscle needed to continue to prevail if there was going to be any hope of seeing these numerous questions through to any sort of a sensible answer.

At the end of the day, Boyd (and even the Space Force) wanted to help the unincorporated planets despite their refusal to accept any. It was not, however, his intention to cause these

people undue harm, so the bluff was just that. If he was at all serious in any sort of malicious aims, the Enforcer would have been brandishing both LUNC's by now - double-fisting them for the elimination of everybody on sight and without remorse.



## 11: Shark and Awe

### Level Y

The Carriveaua analogy for a 'needle in a haystack' was an 'ubvua pin beneath a Teagan Loz Fighter parts pile'. Whatever culture a person hailed from, the puzzlement concerning the whereabouts of the intruder would have been shared by all. Tedium and powerlessness grated against Burdlit's patience as only inevitability could because the fates knew their place and how best to do its job in spoiling the success of the hunt. He realized the target could only get as far and go as fast as two feet would allow the travel but secretly dreaded the idea the Power Authority allowed for a planetary depth of significant places to hide.

What use was the laser rifle - Burdlit thought before slinging its strap over his shoulder with an audible sigh and a slowed travel pace out in front of his contingent. He began to bark out orders to the soldiers still working their way through Level Y with the hopes of maintaining a continued relevance by staving off boredom or perhaps futility with shots to the arm of commanded protocol. Normally close-lipped, the operational general was not the type of person who preferred to hear himself talk for the sake of filling silence. This was because dialect seemed like a code, so the more it was spoken, the greater the likelihood of its mysteries being uncovered.

And this was the second to last thing Burdlit needed right now - the first being the annoyance of the intruder's continued evasion. His relationship with these Humans managed to be soluble

at the moment's notice of his outing. Remember they had left behind the Space Force, so he would be nothing at all for them to discard. But the operational general was certainly not alone in this endeavor because real backup existed and would at least create enough of a diversion for him to be able to escape their clutches.

Even as the contingent fell into a languishing flow of mobile monotony, the soldier with the slate computer still managed to fall behind - her eyes pinned to the device's screen and mesmerized by its remotely-relayed findings:

Assailant pinned down within Sector 1 of Inner Corridor..

Assailant packing heavy compact weaponry..

Assailant incapacitated two soldiers..

Assailant threatening to expose vegetational crevice..

Facial features and bodily characteristics uploaded..

Guidance requested..

"Uh, Sir," the soldier said after picking her mouth off the floor, "Sir!" The rest of the contingent had drifted away at least ten meters down the corridor in the time she had been engrossed in the readout on the slate computer. Shouting was imperative to both catch their attention and halt their progress.

Burdlit stopped any and all forward progress at the insistence of the soldier's bellow, turned around to face her, and was afforded a clear view with his beady-eyed gaze as the rest of

the contingent (who had managed to keep up with a trudge a snail would have sped past) parted their procession in order to accommodate his nonverbal response. He assumed an air of importance from the urgency of the lagging soldier's tone and awaited an explanation.

"That's him," Janette confirmed from a crouch within the center of an elevator heading steadily toward Inner Corridor. She spoke of the image just splashed across the screen of a slate computer before giving the device back to the soldier who had handed it to her. Surrounded by this armed contingent under the botanist's command and enveloped by interpersonal convictions which were secure in their own right, she made no hesitation in standing to await the rest of the subterranean trek with an overtly subdued internalization of giddy anticipation.

"Let me handle this, Janette," Burdlit urged in stride of his contingent's double-timing in order to double back toward the stairwell at least a couple miles from their current and changing position.

That was fine for Janette, but, "I still want to be there when you do."

Wondering what was up with the stubbornness of these Humans was kept to the confinement of those thoughts normally residing in the back of a person's mind, so Burdlit chose the tact of a respectful declination in response, "He's not even wearing a mask. It's Space Force all the way. He'll wipe out this entire planet to protect his identity, and these bold actions are designed to tell us just that. He wants us to know it.

As long as we've got him contained to Inner Corridor, there'll be no chance of his cavalry being called in. The Deew's electromagnetic distortion field is finally doing us a favor. I'll le-"

"Burdlit," Janette interrupted, "I want what I want," and ended the discussion by disconnecting the Ear-To-Mouth Com feed. And what it was she wanted was to look into the intruder's eyes as the operational general handed her his head.

Besides Burdlit conveniently neglected to mention the part about what was going to happen if things got messy and a breach of the Deew's containment occurred. Janette's scientific prowess was necessary short of mandatory, and there was no telling what the intruder's shrouded aims could entail. Yes the threat of him reporting back to the Space Force was real. He needed to be killed well before then, but his immediate capabilities were as of yet undetermined. If at all technologically savvy in nature, the inhabitants of Dio Qze might be left wishing for certain destruction at the hands of the megapower if only it meant a



certainty in deliverance away from the vile clutches of the rabid Deew.

An embarrassing end to a luckily private conversation, Burdlit was glad his soldiers did not hear him getting cut off in the manner Janette had chosen. Humans were so needlessly complex at times with their highs and lows when a levelness of constitution would more than suffice. What was it with her anyway? Things sounded almost personal between the botanist and this intruder. An old acquaintance perhaps? A failed relationship? How could that be possible? He wondered while familiarizing himself with the assailant's image on the soldier's slate computer.

Regardless Janette's actions were going to handcuff his own. She was causing precious soldiers to have to be used for tending to babysitting exercises rather than allowing them to hang back a ways to gum up the quad of entrances to Inner Corridor. The circumferential covering for Dio Qze's entire core was undeniably massive. Although a frontal squeeze play could have been called here and actually made sense, if something went awry with the Deew, more Galaxy Bloc soldiers would be vulnerable and lost via this all-encompassing tact. He knew full well about what Deews were capable of when the Humans did not, but that differed far greatly from the familiarity the operational general envisioned having for the intruder.

Inner Corridor

The idea of control was much more a concept than the outward leverage normally making up its portrayal. In Boyd's mind, the latter explanation (where he was somehow causing everything that occurred to his opponents) felt somewhat backward. The Enforcer did not possess any of the uncanny supernatural abilities of an Ethereal. He might have been packing two LUNC's and a collection of Duzo 16/7 Charges underneath his trench coat, but this was simply the arsenal of one man. The faithful Class V Fighter even had no way of being signaled in order to reach him within this communicative dead zone.

There was technically no way out except for the ways Boyd's opponents allowed.

Burdlit was a Carriveau spy in the midst of gullible Humans being exploited via the 'enemy of my enemy' gambit, so he needed Boyd to be silenced at all costs and would be willing to expense that across Galaxy Bloc's mortgaged future. Who would the unincorporated planets believe if the Enforcer was actually captured and interrogated? The operational general could not leave this answer up to chance.

Janette pretended to be none too pleased with Boyd and his methods yet held a true identity whose pretext was way more guarded than either of the secretive lives the Enforcer or Burdlit were leading. She wanted a controlled variable that could be used to test the operational general's loyalty. As much as her mouth or the in-character thoughts screamed for blood, the unusually high-ranking Galaxy Bloc official might very well turn out to be the greatest threat because of an unassuming deviousness.

One wanted Boyd dead. The other wanted him alive for now. He simply allowed the battle of their wills to play out against a

conveniently placed target adorning his back. By having the botanist and operational general come to him, it saved the Enforcer the trouble of having to search them out.

Boyd was feeling pretty good about his accomplishments and really proud of his prospects until an errant hand laser pulse whizzed past the left ear of a previously cocky head causing him to twist via a corkscrew to all fours on the floor and a position that could double for a sprinter's starting stance. The LUNC remained in the grasp of his right hand - pressed easily against the ground as a result of what turned out to be the soft landing from a specialist whose experience often doubled as a lifesaving anticipation. As the Enforcer's trench coat flapped downward to meet the conclusion of his evasive maneuver, his eyes glanced upward at the laser's point of impact on the window. Pulse retardant materials were a surety, but this was assuming the energy projectile could have pierced its shielding.

A sigh of momentary relief was breathed as Boyd was not yet ready or willing to deal with that plant at this point when Janette and Burdlit were honestly more menacing, but it became short-lived as reality settled back in jump-starting his stalled heart and restoring the previously stolen wind from the sails of his lungs. The Enforcer was but only one man, and that was close. He flung a disapproving eye contact back toward the perceived trajectory of the shot.

The reluctant shooter ducked back behind the cover of some cubicles and seemed to be almost as worse for psychological wear as it appeared anxiousness had caused the laser pulse to be fired in the first place - accidentally. Well adrenaline tended to do that in these types of situations. The possible reprimand aside, chemical enhancement almost aided the soldier in chopping Boyd

down! What jumping the hand laser did though was destroy any element of surprise the soldiers might have had. As slim as it was, they just lost their one opportunity to take him out. He would now never allow his confidence to give them a second chance to put laser pulse impressions into his face. The gauntlet technology of his combat gear would shield the rest of his body.

Clearly these soldiers were answering to Burdlit's orders in the interim before the fabrication of an aloof Janette arrived as she was unable to tip her hand of competence from afar. Until then, the fight for Boyd's life was on. The operational general was clearly calling the shots figuratively and literally.

## 12: Unrhetorical Answers, Part One

There was not enough time for Boyd's entire life to flash before his eyes, so he often settled on a portion of it as a consolation inquiry. Normally those questions about 'how did he get into this' or 'how would he make it out' were brushed aside because the Enforcer was chosen for this occupation and prided himself on being a professional when performing it. Thoughts to the contrary were rooted in self-doubt and often preceded an uneventful death. His soliloquy stemmed from a simple technique called continuous improvement that kept him asking 'what could he have done differently' in seeking out the honest, personalized feedback its answers provided.

This time around, it was only necessary to go back as far as Boyd's most previous mission on the unincorporated planet of Pasma Tam. The investor cover story and its expensive wardrobe were all intact, but his life had been placed in jeopardy much earlier on in the proceedings:

"Nothing happens on this planet without my knowing. Nada. All channels of commerce and government run through me at one point or another," Mexico Riguez explained from the passenger seat of a four-door vehicle. Actually he was more of a full-time snitch Boyd had done extensive homework on prior to that night's meeting, but calling him out was inadvisable from his position.

And Boyd's position was directly diagonal to Mexico in the left backseat. But despite the darkened interior

that came about from this nighttime drive, he realized the trip was only slated to be one-way. It was not the fact the Enforcer had to leave his trusty LUNC's behind at the behest of his shady host's 'no weapons' requirement for granting this meeting in the first place or the fact the other two individuals in the car were the hardest of hardened killers but a combination of both providing a sadistically subtle hint of an impending demise.

Mexico elaborated on this very point, "See I'm very much in the know about everything that happens here. Todo. So to my surprise, I learned you were poking your head around la planeta. ¿Por qué, Señor Boyd?"

"You gotta break bread," Boyd cut straight to the point. He chose to meet the host's arrogance with a boldness of insanity, "You've got way too much exposure, and you're making way too much money to not cut me in for your own sake." To the Enforcer's right sat Jocelin Vanaller and behind the wheel drove Corinna Esposto - Mexico's intendants and vicious personal guard concealed within a pair of pretty packages. He could only imagine how those weapons were occasionally used to net their boss the advancement to this plush lifestyle of an underworld leader.

"Protection," Mexico laughed. "Are you threatening me?"

That would come later, so Boyd focused the discussion, "I want in on the Indra Pallavan Trade Routes: Contacts, logistics, and the pricing tier beginning at cost plus one."

At this point, Mexico was considering Boyd to be either ambitious or crazy to be making such demands, but a

person he felt to be this outnumbered and outgunned while mouthing off in quite the fastidious manner could not have been unintelligent. His immediate wish was to see this conversation play out a little more, "My network is my net worth. You've already dictated to me your terms, but despite that, why else should I take you up on your offer? Explica."

"Because your percentage continues to drop the longer you proceed to drag me out into the boondocks for the purposes of my quiet disposal," Boyd replied.

"Tu tienes cojones grandes," Mexico muttered while shaking his head in disbelief. And he was the only person animated in response.

Corinna and Jocelin were stone-cold. They desisted from displaying any outward body language or emotion in favor of a stalwart attention, so Boyd found it difficult to read them. Mexico was easy - a buffoon hiding behind the leverage of his various extortion-laden tactics and only preferring to do his own dirt when it was a certainty he could not get caught, similar to now.

Speaking cautiously with his hands so as to not cause Jocelin any undue concern, Boyd clarified, "It's not even that. The average gross terrestrial product for an unincorporated planet is estimated to be one-third of a Space Force-aligned planet. Translation: Two-thirds of Galaxy Bloc is either doing without, making due with less, or starving.

Trading with yourself only goes so far in this universe, and with the financial pressure the Space Force is applying to any potential trade partners to force them to

think with their pocket eBooks rather than their charity, what Galaxy Bloc is attempting in secession isn't sustainable.

It also doesn't help that what little bit these unincorporated planets produce is being leeched off of by yourself and others like you who know how to sniff out financial arbitrage like vultures. The Indra Pallavan Trade Routes are a closed-circuit distribution chain which can only thrive with focus. Diverting the supply dilutes the demand. I'm no economist, but you're hastening their fall."

Boyd's analysis caused Mexico to turn around in the seat and face him for the purposes of eyeballing the response to this question, "Who do you work for?"

"I'm self-employed," Boyd lied with a straight face, "but savvy. Maybe I just have a big heart. Galaxy Bloc is in line for a self-inflicted Humanitarian crisis this universe has not seen since decades back when the richest nations of Earth just couldn't figure out how to assist entire impoverished regions."

"More like neglected, hombre," Mexico added.

With a nod of total agreement, Boyd stated, "Then you see what I'm saying."

The final request of this discussion unfairly yet purposely held Boyd's fate in conjunction with the validity of his forthcoming response, so Mexico probed, "Pretend I don't and enlighten me."

"The inhabitants of the unincorporated planets are proud," Boyd answered, "but Galaxy Bloc leadership is like us - a bunch of bigger picture types. I've got the inventory and can continuously supply them. Nobody has to



run back crying to the Space Force. Additionally my surplus doesn't know where it comes from, and the normal everyday people don't need to know and won't find out either. To them, crops just happened to be exceptionally abundant this year, innovation is peaking across their tech sectors, and foreign entities have signed onto the Indra Pallavan Trade Routes as viable import/export partners.

You've got the connections that can make this happen. I've got your percentage. Right now, you're playing the part of a common thief, and your contacts are trying to make a quick profit with the idea of relocating when the unincorporated planets are eventually bled dry. And they're clearly aware, otherwise why would they be dealing with the likes of you for a piece of petty cash?

My solution is win-win. My supplier has the margins because we're dealing with volume. You're dealing with what - two planets, probably just started working on your third at most? We'll lock up the entirety of Galaxy Bloc in time. I only need a warm transfer in order to make my pitch. Of course, you'd be paid a finder's fee seeing as though your chance at a residual disappeared when we passed ten miles outside the city limits."

"About that, amigo," Mexico said while pulling a previously concealed hand laser out and pointing it at Boyd's face, "I don't make any decisions before checking references."

Out the corner of Boyd's eye, he caught peripheral sight of a Seor Laser (an easily concealable handgun by its miniature size and not as powerful as a hand laser but inconsequentially lethal from this distance) pointed at his

temple. With a snicker and not so much as a break in the eye contact he continued to hold with Mexico, the Enforcer quipped, "Well references are always available upon request."

Mexico's play here was to try and cut out the middle-person by taking Boyd hostage and either forcing the supplier to deal directly with him or throwing this mystery logistics channel off the secretive trail of the Indra Pallavan Trade Routes entirely and altogether protecting the integrity of his assets. Meager they most certainly were not as was mistakenly implied, so stubbornness came into play where greed could not be exploited.

Being tagged as a visionary in retaining his label of being open-minded from a business perspective still applied to Mexico since the imagined wealth was only relegated to the lain-away place in the back of his mind and not at all discarded outright by any stretch of that same imagination. But what would it look like if he allowed Boyd to just waltz onto his turf and barter him out a consistent revenue stream with merely hollow guarantees in place of an established relationship on a whim no less?

Who did this guy think he was? Laserproof? Mexico had never heard of him. How much was his associated level of clout? What did his backbone (team support) consist of? Unarmed and isolated, this Enderbrook Boyd must have been nuts. The truth would soon be forthcoming.

Either that or Boyd's Class V Fighter could thunder across the front of the car and cause Corinna to swerve into an uncontrolled and unintended skid to the vehicle's left. And the Enforcer left the vehicle almost at the mercy of

being flung outside its open door! His body tumbled to a painful, limp halt across the rough pavement of the road, and he looked like an inviting target, but his faithful ship doused the street with incoming laser fire that appeared (to the seat belt-wearing passengers) to have originated from various undetermined directions. The warning shots dotting the ground surrounded them and a series of perceptibly rapid changes to the lasers' delivery angle were meant to simulate a multiple ship assault.

With only the unhelpful whir of the fighter's thrusters cluing Mexico in that whatever seemed to be tracing overhead - unleashing this assault (which just slammed a pair of lasers into the now shot-open trunk) was still very much present in the area. He motioned to Jocelin by shaking his head in a negative manner to conservatively table these negotiations for now. She leaned across the backseat and stretched against the impediment of her unrelenting seat belt in order to pull the rear left door closed as Corinna righted the tires and sped off leaving Boyd to lie in a twisted crumple.

The uncannily intuitive fighter fired off a few more laser pulses in the direction of the fleeing car to make sure none of its occupants got any bright ideas about trying to back up or come back around to run Boyd over. Once the threat was sufficiently distanced from the immediate vicinity, the ship ceased firing and set down beside an Enforcer more embarrassed than wounded in choosing to remain on the ground languishing over his battered pride.

In reminiscing, Boyd could now openly admit his tact was not

exactly the best back then. Okay it was downright dumb. But it was what he learned from the rest of this side story that would serve him well at present.

## 13: Unrhetorical Answers, Part Two

Shredded clothing matched Boyd's shredded ego, but clothes could be replaced, so there was no use worrying about those as he was much luckier to even be alive after that fiasco. Thanks were due in part to his choice of these nicer fabrics and their thicker weave because they insulated his body from being scraped up when the Enforcer decided to jump out the car and onto the meaty areas of his body as if he were laying down a motorcycle. This was not another example of the testosterone-quenched male ego at work because in black ops, posturing got people killed, and players (like Mexico) could easily sniff out posers. It was just one of those things kinda like voice recognition on customer service phone lines: A great idea in theory but excruciatingly painful for callers when put into practice.

And on the subject of pain, Boyd remembered the bruises vividly. Those welts from the road burn of a cushioned slide in a designer outfit at fifty miles per hour had taken a couple weeks to fully heal but also served to add a bit of seared permanence to the learning of his lesson. There was this ongoing physiopsychological reminder about how a reckless tactic that was short on 'tact' could always cause him to wind up inside 'i'ntensive 'c'are. The pie's flavor happened to have been of the humble variety, but he was not arrogant in the slightest. Confident, yes. Conceited, no. Arrogance was unnecessary because the Space Force had faith in the Enforcer's abilities, and he had faith in himself.

As far as the lesson was concerned, it became more a comparison of results than a reawakening of acceptable ideology. Black ops was a little different beast than the overt and authoritarian nature of law enforcement or the subtlety and umbrage of sales because the occupation managed to combine both areas into a harmonious tune of cohesion.

Too much selling and not enough authority did not translate to respect. Having thrown himself from a moving vehicle because Boyd's charms alone were not enough to thwart an obvious kidnapping attempt proved this and also brought a chuckle to the introspection. He could laugh about it now but was not laughing then.

Too much authority and not enough selling caught Boyd up in this current predicament stuck within the inner recesses of a foreign planet as what could be considered a spy with an army bearing down upon him and his back up against a biological weapon. By being granted covert espionage powers via an explicit interpretation of the Space Force Doctrine allowing certain higher-ups inside the faction to sanction the Enforcers as a black ops unit for the purpose of keeping the megapower in power, he was well within his rights to be carrying about the Power Authority and Inner Corridor in such an intrusive manner. But what did any of this mean to Galaxy Bloc?

Politics. In returning to the side story, Boyd had made it back to his darkened penthouse apartment and trudged through its spacious interior while flinging articles of ruined clothing in various, different directions all seeming to coalesce around second-rate, nonsensical piles across the floor. Thoughts were contained to formulating the strategy

of get-back - not quite getting revenge but not quite getting even either. Getting back.

Boyd needed Mexico alive in order to be shown the virtual on-ramp for the Indra Pallavan Trade Routes or alive at least until he became familiar enough to navigate the distribution channel by himself. But this did not mean the disrespect should or would go unpunished.

A trunk resting at the foot of Boyd's bed housed his next play. He put the palm of his hand on the DNA Recognition/Authorization contacts lining a rectangular area along the top and front of the chest in order to unlock its latch. Combat gear was located inside and fitted. The dual LUNC's were checked and holstered. A tattletale minicomputer was used to locate the whereabouts of Mexico via the telltale trail of unmistakable biometric scans. Apparently the target had decided to hop the first shuttle out of Pasma Tam, but the Class V Fighter sitting conveniently on the roof of the Enforcer's penthouse would not be too far behind in pursuit.

## Second Earth

It took no time at all to track Mexico down, but almost a week passed before Boyd had systematically cornered his target to an appropriate setting courtesy of some light surveillance and an amassed list of frequented establishments. The venues were each somewhat of an unknown variable, but patience allowed him to settle upon a time

(for the encounter) of his choosing.

The inside of Humpsman Bar was not overly seedy. It was just dark. The ambience was of a hearth and warmth that seemed strangely familial. In creating a home for criminals, the bar's ownership had made the entire establishment feel like home. Rustic lighting from tabletop candles to what seemed to be overhead pool table lights throughout. Quaint. Easy on the eyes. Prime for searching. And guns were allowed.

But LUNC's were undetectable, so Boyd did not need to even worry about that. And within the friendly confines of this building, it was much better to be caught with a weapon than to be caught off guard without one. He just walked past a gathering of reputed Palatine Triad members on his left but made no eye contact. They were players in Atro City connected to businesses like Ennead Tech Corp via an unofficial relationship of being hired underground muscle, but they were not the only group in attendance with corporate backing.

Off in the far corner, the notorious Olney was whooping it up with associates in what appeared to be some sort of celebration. Although this criminal was not the focus of the mission, the situation should not have been misconstrued in any way the Slorg was vulnerable as none of his personal guard were at all partaking in the festivities and were probably pretty pissed about things - raring to open up on anybody who might further ruin their night by trying to put an assassination attempt damper on the evening.



Shokan Subject members were also present and a generally younger, more randomized assortment of gangs but finally organized albeit indentured to the greater Shokan martial arts clans through the simple threat of impending death otherwise. They were putting the pool tables and arcade games to some good use. Because of a relationship one of the Enforcers' leaders (Chipshot) had with the Shokan, those Subject members were potential allies, but that leader was also lying up in a coma at Atro City Hospital, so this extraction was going to be left to a surgical tact only Boyd could provide.

The target sat comfortably in the center seat at a U-shaped booth of his own surrounded by Corinna and Jocelin who Boyd still believed to be as deceptively dangerous as they were beautiful. Of Mexico's intendants, a person would be making a serious, harrowing mistake by underestimating their true worth. Somewhere on them - either underneath their blouses and skirts or inside their clutch handbags hid the weaponry. With a mouthful of food, it was clear he appeared to be enjoying a late supper.

In announcing his presence, Boyd called out, "Mexico Riguez."

"¿Señor Boyd?" Mexico looked up and greeted. "I'm honored by your haunting presence. Aren't you supposed to be el hombre muerto?" Corinna and Jocelin began to reach for wherever they concealed their weaponry, but he held them at bay with an off right hand that had just been working a knife while his left hand gracefully wielded a fork preoccupied with a piece of steak recently carved away from its T-bone.

"See I've been meaning to talk to somebody about that," Boyd explained, "and I heard you were the guy."

Mexico took the chance to finally put the piece of steak inside his mouth before stating, "I don't talk to dead men. They never pay their bills," while chewing.

The sentiment was morbid, but Mexico had clearly authored Boyd's predicament back on Pasma Tam by putting out a hit on him. True, moving quickly in tracing after the target had avoided any sort of hired conflict, but the Enforcer found a certain irony in those previous words and suggested, "Let's put that theory to the test." He turned around and questioned, "So it was Olney who set me up?"

The audacity of Boyd's utterance caused Mexico to choke down that piece of steak. He started coughing and reaching for his soft drink as Corinna reached for him to perhaps offer to perform the Heimlich maneuver. Jocelin had her eyes peeled on Olney's table in the far right corner.

But Boyd was not finished with his antics and dropped a LUNC into his right hand. He held the weapon down at his side so as to hold off the drawing of any attention until the last possible moment.

"¡Estúpido!" Mexico exclaimed before wiping his mouth with a cloth napkin, standing up, and settling for staring a hole through Boyd's unusually cold eyes when he would have preferred for one of his intendants to put a laser pulse through the face of the annoyance.

"What's it gonna be, Mexico?" Boyd asked. An informant's liability would always be the lack of credibility in the eyes of those who they might potentially rat out. "Your reputation precedes you, and I'm sure

somebody (the caliber of Olney) might not take too kindly to being fingered for my woes and embarrassed during his dinner. ¿Comprende?"

The potential for implication created a leveraged loyalty that wound up bringing Mexico and his intendants into the Enforcer fold. A partnership of convenience - blackmail or otherwise, he became a convenient source of information for the black ops unit, and they did not have him killed.

There was more to this ongoing side story, but the lesson Boyd took away from these first couple chapters of it was charisma needed to be tempered to a relevance while power could also stand some much improved timing in utilization. He would never again go into a situation believing people would be capable of considering the importance of something just because that something happened to be important to him.

Galaxy Bloc did not care about Boyd's intentions and could care less about the whim of his employer. It was up to him to figure out a way to make them care. He took off running from his three-point stance but met the brunt of an unseen force that lifted the Enforcer from his feet, drove him through the air, and plowed him into the window standing between Inner Corridor and the biological weapon!



## 14: Boyd Versus Burdlit

From almost an outward-looking fishbowl viewpoint, the Deew possessed a unique perspective and seat for this battle. A fight between Burdlit and an entity who it could only refer to as an unfamiliar - no wagers were placed, but an eye remained intent upon and deftly attuned to witnessing the outcome. Although this eye featured a vantage of three hundred sixty different degrees of which the melee was but one point from a nearly infinite stream of data points to its particular interests.

Like a quarterback who could sense the pressure of a collapsing pocket, Boyd absorbed the blow and let it take him so as to not cough up the LUNC or get backed up additional yardage in a losing, surrendered down. Sacked but resistant, he had managed to activate the gauntlet technology of his combat gear in order to blunt the frontal blow and rear impact. Burdlit's attack classified as anything of the hostile projectile nature would, and like an offensive attack, the Enforcer's personal shield was there to defend against it.

"You finally decided to show up," Boyd admitted to a calculated intent in having lingered about his position - out in the wide open for some time or time enough to allow Burdlit to catch up. He would never cop to the pain of the blow as the Carriveau were a powerful race, and the operational general's assault was indecipherable from the force of a car crash, but the winded voice from the high-pitched utterance of breath being squeezed from his lungs as a result of the collision did not lie!

"What are you, Space Force?" An invisible Burdlit questioned while driving the intruder into the window with every bit of malice he could muster. Any other Human would have been killed instantly by the attempt thus prompting the question as the operational general lowered his chameleon-like transparency to a pallet of his normalized, reptilian (in appearance) color scheme.

Even from off his feet with his back plastered - pinned against the window by the ill graces of a disheartening thud, Boyd was still a lethal individual and went immediately for the kill shot by recovering his flailing right arm with the LUNC in its right hand and bending it at the elbow to let off a point-blank range laser pulse to what he hoped would have been Burdlit's head! The Enforcer's answer to the operational general's question became an accusation that conveniently laid both sets of their cards on the table for mutual display, "Since when did the Carriveaua start rubbing elbows with Humans?"

At this point, Burdlit and the intruder were engaging in the nuanced language of battle, and things could have continued like that all day long with the Galaxy Bloc troops instructed to stay clear plus out their way. He turned his skull completely around in precision avoidance of the laser pulse. Eerie - the operational general's head came back to face forward bearing the enunciation of an expansive jaw, somewhat frightening dental work (for those who might not have been familiar with the Carriveaua), and the culmination of this predatory utterance, "The hopes and dreams of the unincorporated planets are merely the appetizer, but the Space Force will be our main course," before extending his neck to snap off a strike as a potentially fatal chomp with a trajectory aimed for his struggling captive's neck!

"Funny," Boyd snickered, "I thought you seemed a little

familiar. I think they dropped your aunt when loading my luggage onto the shuttle for Dio Qze." With the butt of the LUNC already in the perfect position, he reared back and chopped against Burdlit's powerful left arm at the root of the grasp that had him dangling a couple feet off the ground literally and metrically. There was going to be no love in this bite, so the Enforcer followed up by smashing his right elbow into the operational general's face just above the razor sharp mandibles. This sent the Carriveaua reeling with both hands to a paining head and welcomingly dropped him to the ground in a tripod crouch.

"Stupid," it was unclear as to whether Burdlit was referring to the intruder's disrespectful words, "fu--ing," the pain delivered by that elbow to the bridge of his nose, "Human," or both. With eyes tearing and the sharpest of pains closing up the operational general's own mouth in order for it to be able to mutter moans of assuagement, he stumbled backward tripping over his own tail.

But Boyd knew Burdlit was running game, realized he happened to be in way too close, and braced for the secondary attack from the operational general's tail that was never out of position. It coiled around him and squeezed with a crushing grip which could have paralyzed its captive with the simple snap of the pressured vertebrae, but the effect to the Enforcer was reduced to merely feeling snug because of the outward push of assistance from the personal shield. What he had succeeded in doing was stunning the Carriveaua with the resultant watery eyes of a defensive technique that worked on more than just Humans, so an anaconda-like envelopment could not further ensnare him within his current bout of helplessness.

The emotional component was not to be overlooked either

because Burdlit began to take a page out the Human eBook in allowing the pettiness of the squabble to dictate his actions. The intruder's arms were pinned at their sides. His captive's feet were pressing backward - brushing futilely against the ground in order to garner leverage and precious inches of distance. The prey knew and respected how deadly the operational general was with close-quartered offense, and if it were not for him being unable to focus at this point, the person would have been halfway down his throat by now. This meat was tough and needed slightly more tenderizing.

Clutching Boyd in the unenviable position such as this was, Burdlit's tail tensed up and flung him back toward and through the front three rows worth of cubicles - all the way across the track-like corridor in a calamitous scene that cleared out furniture and fleeing, formerly onlooking soldiers alike. Once repositioned, they began to dump laser fire indiscriminately into the area the path of the Enforcer's apparent destruction led up to.

After shaking off some of the lingering disorientation from his bruised face, Burdlit turned and trailed that path up to a fully cooked meal he was hoping would at least be medium well if not well-done by now. And as the operational general approached, the soldiers stopped firing in succession - in order to allow him an ease of access to the results or perhaps the remains.

Such powerful entities - Burdlit and the unfamiliar were clearly two of the strongest beings on Dio Qze. To the Deew, the strongest being on the planet, each of them paled by comparison of its magisterial existence. But an assist was an assist nonetheless, so it welcomed their contribution to the satiation of a bewildered yearn. Consumed by the thought that was more a



reverberant, involuntary instinct, a strategy had been solidified for the purposes of freeing itself from the purgatorial slant feigning complacency.

The window was cracked.

The shield weakened in that area.

Emotionless - so devoid of any hint of vindictiveness: Analyzing both the power levels and technology that caused the malfunction to occur in the stasis array surrounding the vegetational crevice gave the Deew the manipulable data required to finally be able to realize its own destiny by claiming its Ethereal-given right to feed.

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