

If You Have to Ask....

The synthetic planet of Second Earth is not just for visiting. You can live there as well! The Space Force has taken to every painstaking detail during their terraforming in order to ensure both the amenities and necessities are available in making this decision to move an easy one. Although it's the hope the choice be a no-brainer, we realize a lot of forethought will've gone into your ultimate selection. We also realize this planet happens to be one of many on a potential list of considered destinations.

Welcoming all newcomers as well as seasoned visitors to the planet is the capital city of Atro. Home of such monumental landmarks as Cipher Coliseum and Ennead Tower, Atro City is a beacon of both recreation and industry. Each is encouraged and the nightlife is exciting with traditional hot spots like the family-owned Humpsman Bar, but Second Earth is best known for offering the finest in education because we want you to feel comfortable in raising your own family.

Although Second Earth happens to be under the protective umbrella of the Space Force, you can be doubly assured of keeping your family safe with the dedicated Second Earth Special Police Force and healthy with accredited institutions like Atro City Hospital's health care systems. Long-term care is also available via the in-network, reputable, and highly referenceable Dynamics Nursing Home. And whether you choose the mountains, forests, pastures, cities, countryside, super rural areas, outlying continents, or perhaps even industrial areas like the clean and spacious Staines Warehouse District, you can be assured your access to security and wellness will stretch to all different corners of the globe.

These different corners also carry within them a wealth of

culture and diversity. The proprietors of the Shokan Discipline have made a home here in a big way by building their largest Dojo on Second Earth. Alien races from around the universe have always been welcome and can be seen frequenting several areas of the planet because they too have managed to settle down throughout it. Since there's no shortage of housing, condominiums, or apartments in a wide variety of styles that have an almost infinite combination of furnishings, it's easy to see why so many have been attracted to the planet and very few if any (save for the vacationers) leave.

Clean air and water, delectable cuisine, vibrant neighborhoods, quiet communities, and mild seasonal weather patterns (to boot) are what Second Earth is all about. The Space Force's perfection in design leads to an excellence in execution you'll not only be proud of but you won't have to worry about. We invite you to extend your family by joining ours!

Second Earth

"The Pride of the Quadron System"

(Of Space Force Dominion, Jurisdiction, and Territory)

First Edition, August 2011

Criticality - The Complete First Season

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The word 'family' has become a four letter word often synonymous with the act of (player) hating in its libelous use. When your so-called loved ones are trying to kill you, it makes this especially true and the relationship particularly difficult to reconcile.

-Billy Smith

Whenever you feel like you've been backed into a corner, turn to the people in your corner who have your back!

-Sylvia Lenorox

Second Earth Special Police Force

A friend is somebody who'd take that laser pulse for you. People like this are a lot less apt to take you for granted since they're tasked with the responsibility of trading their life for yours in the event the situation calls for it. This is the only type of person I identify with, and I find I return their calls.

-Julian Kazar

Second Earth Special Police Force

It was a scary revelation when I finally realized there was more control in being drunk than being sober.

-Pete Rogue

Second Earth Special Police Force

For

The Wait.

01: Hostage Situation

Only a seemingly frail hand was exposed from underneath a heavy cotton blanket. Pete Rogue did not even make time to turn back the bed anymore. He merely slept on top the fully made-up comforter wrapped within a burgundy-colored blanket. Ironically this was not even the cold season. The climate of the synthetic planet, Second Earth, mirrored that of Earth, but for as extreme of cold weather the heavy blanket called for, seventy-five degrees was not it.

Connected to that hand was a cigarette which appeared to be inseparable from its interlocking fingers, and the ash tray was the floor. Merely the pungent odor of cigarette smoke and the stale stench of warm liquor mingled among the atmosphere creating bar-like conditions similar to those before the public smoking bans had taken root throughout the universe.

The phone must have rang ten times, but Pete was not there mentally at least. An argument could be made he did not want to be there physically either, but with a cruel Ethereal unwilling to hear his plea, the recently widowed man resorted to killing himself slowly. Too pathetic to get it over with via the assistance of the Triple Action LUNC on his night table, wallowing in self-pity made up for lifelessness in bed.

"This is fu--ing unbelievable," Julian Kazar said as he gave up on using the Ear-To-Mouth Com to reach Pete while walking up the pathway to the front door of the single level, ranch style house. The doorbell would probably be useless as well, so the bottom of a

balled fist and yelling would have to suffice, "Man, this shi- is getting old! We're gonna be late. It's already your fault I'm stuck on this stupid shift, so wake your as- the fu-- up!"

"I'm up," Pete lied, "da-n!"

Julian's voice and door pounding carried all the way into Pete's bedroom, "Dude, I'm not playing. Open up this door before I have to kick it in and drag you out."

Pete opened the door - hunched over with squinting eyes while wearing boxers, socks, and nothing else. "I was just resting my head."

"You look like shi-," Julian opined while shaking his. "Get cleaned up, and I'll buy you breakfast."

"That's not necessary," Pete yawned. "Give me fifteen minutes."

Sixteen minutes later, they were both sitting in Julian's brand new blue Mustang GT500 convertible parked on the curb directly outside the house. He took a moment to put the top down, of course.

Pete was astonished, "Can you afford this on a cop's salary?"

Julian turned the key in the ignition and smiled, "Yeah I'm on the take. I took this baby from Impounds & Auctions. You wouldn't believe what all is stashed down there just sitting there."

"So you thought you'd put a couple miles on it, Ferris?" Pete sighed, "Well they always say we should look like someone the people we deal with would want to do business with. Does this

lighter work?" He reached inside his trench coat for a beat-up and abused pack of cigarettes that had seen no lack of attention these past few days.

"Eh?" Julian caught sight of Pete fumbling around the console before scrunching up his face in clear admonishment of the activities. He snatched the lighter out his partner's hand and stated very clearly, "If you light that thing in here, you're walking to work. Since you seem to have some sort of oral fixation, I've got some gum in the glove compartment which could possibly try and help to hide the fact you've been drinking before your shift."

Pete put a throbbing forehead in the palms of his hands and began to massage both temples with the first three fingers of each respective hand. "No thanks."

Julian cleared his throat.

"What?" Pete snapped.

"Seat belt," Julian said simply.

Pete yanked at the seat belt unsuccessfully for the first few times out of frustration before easing up and finally getting it locked into place. "You're getting on my fu--ing nerves."

Julian laughed as he checked for oncoming traffic and pulled off, "We're cops."

"That just means we get to break the rules we set for everybody else," Pete replied as he sat back to enjoy the new ride.

Pete lived in the suburbs, so Julian had decided to take the long way into work for the purposes of savoring his new car, but a voice came over their Ear-To-Mouth Coms that kept them from taking in the scenery, "We've got a silent alarm going off at an Ennead building. You're the closest unit."

"That company's got locations all over the place," Julian stated. "This is your neck of the woods. Do you know where it's at?"

Pete fingered his Ear-To-Mouth Com in order to respond back to the page, "Yeah, Julian. It's one of their satellite offices. There's only one in this area, and I know exactly where it is. We're a couple minutes out. HQ, we're on it. What about backup?"

"The nearest unit is about thirty minutes out," the voice announced. "It's requested you assess the situation."

Julian threw up a flustered right hand, turned briefly to Pete, and asked, "How is that even possible?"

"That a planet completely controlled by the Space Force has this much crime?" Pete sought sarcastic clarification, "Or the leading civilian law enforcement agency on this entire planet is never around when you need them?"

"Broad daylight too," Julian reminded, "so it's most likely a hostage situation. By not sending in the sirens, we probably kept the alarm-puller alive for a few more moments."

Turning to look over his shoulder toward the rear of the car, Pete inquired, "Do you still keep the equipment in the trunk?"

Julian nodded but then felt the need to preface his admission, "I was planning on giving the car back."

"And they say I'm the bad cop." Pete pointed at the upcoming intersection while calling out directions, "Hit a left up here."

Ennead Satellite Office

The lobby of the building was adequate yet open and inviting due to its glass architecture. For the terrorists to have pulled a move like this, they had to have scoped out the location for weeks - possibly months. There was no good place to hide in the lobby area, so it was imperative they adhered to the tightly-planned rules from their leader who happened to be on his way upstairs. A man of action, when there was dirt that needed to be done, he was more than willing to get his own hands dirty in order to make sure the dirt was done correctly.

The first rule involved insider presence. This person was responsible for gathering the building plans, schedules, and procedures. To make sure the person was not later implicated in the crime should things go wrong during the day of the incursion, it meant at least one of the hostages would be a mole.

The second rule covered building lockdown procedure and watch. If this was as professional as it seemed, they would have at least locked all the doors on the lower level by the first minute of the crime. Their lookouts would have been scattered to the four corners of the immediate vicinity before the crime even began.

The third rule had to do with crowd control. This building was too large to herd its entire capacity in any sensible manner, so a preset hack of the security system (which included the taking out of maintenance lines) locked out all the floors and elevators plus made it quite difficult for anybody who caught wind of the confinement activity to call for help.

That third rule had a potential subset which could include varying degrees of posturing used to prove credibility to either the hostages or the authorities or sometimes both at once. To the underworld, an open debate persisted between two schools of

thought: One claimed making an unfortunate example of a hostage was a necessity and the other claimed the elimination of hostages actually decreased leverage exponentially with the authorities.

The fourth rule was to get the team out faster than the team went in. Skill in this area depended upon the intense preparation for and the perfect execution of the previous three rules. If those other rules were closely followed, completing the scavenger hunt and navigating the ensuing route(s) of escape would each be a no-brainer to accomplish.

All this preparation and execution was only as good as how it held up during adversity. The first test came in the form of Julian knocking on the special access glass door next to the revolving door. He put a stick of gum between his lips and began to chew thoroughly while waiting for somebody to answer.

"Who's that guy?" The terrorist nearest a hostage (who happened to be the building's receptionist) asked.

Another terrorist sat in one of the puffy yet stiff chairs adorning the lobby. His attention was being momentarily held by the random magazines littered across the glass waiting table.

Each terrorist had a handheld transceiver locked on so the entire team could be kept in the loop of constant communication. The apparent leader of this incursion barked out orders across theirs, "Find out what he wants and get rid of him."

The terrorist nearest the receptionist nudged her with the concealed barrel of his weapon and ordered, "Pretend I'm your supervisor and do your job. This thing is not filled with water."

As Julian was buzzed in, he spit his 'fresh' stick of gum into the closest receptacle and put an even newer piece in.

"Can I help you?" The receptionist asked.

"Yeah uh, do you know where Sycamore Road is? I've been driving around in circles for a while and thought I'd just pull off, stop, and ask for some directions."

Pete had been dropped off a little bit before Julian was to arrive with the purpose of him getting a slightly different view of the situation. On foot, he was able to get in close to the building, and it did not matter the rugged cop could have been spotted. The boldness of a broad daylight incursion forced the hand of discreetness, so snipers in the middle of a corporate park were out of the question.

Discreetness on the side of the terrorists that was. Pete pulled open his trench coat to reveal a grappling gun and then proceeded to aim upward for the roof of the building. The grapple shot out with a vicious kickback and hooked onto the gutter as he tugged on the line. It was not secure, but anyway this line of work had that issue with job security. The funny thought (which happened to be somewhat morbid) actually brought a smile to his lips as the rugged cop began his unsteady ascent.

The power of the plan Pete and Julian had been formulating for all of five minutes was in the ability to keep the terrorists off guard with unorthodox tactics such as this. The Second Earth Special Police Force would have never reacted in this manner instead choosing the cliché negotiation tactic. The Space Force would have never wasted time with this, but if they had, the thunder would be brought down with Class III Fighters monopolizing the skies and soldiers peppering the grounds. No this crazy man could not have been either of those, so although the terrorists had seen this action a mile away because of their members posted up along various vantage points throughout the corporate park, they

never saw it coming.

Pete stopped to light a cigarette after he passed the second floor. There would almost assuredly be guards on the rooftop that had to be dealt with, but above all, he was a patient man and chose to take his time when marching into danger.

But first came the infamous look at the ground. Pete felt nauseous but inhaled deeply on the cigarette to bring him back to reality. The rugged cop continued upward.

"So you take 53 to Hapsfield?" Julian could see the fear in the receptionist's eyes. One wrong slip of the tongue and she was dead as soon as he left. The other hostages probably did not have the full extent of the thirty minutes needed for the Second Earth Special Police Force to arrive en masse either, so this was an effort to stall.

"No!" The terrorist nearest the receptionist snapped before pushing her aside and snatching the complimentary road map (provided courtesy of the building) away from her. "What's your problem, bro? She told you the way six times!"

Julian was taken aback by the sentiment, "You're extremely rude." He looked again at the receptionist but pointed to the terrorist nearest her. "Is this your supervisor? Maybe I need to speak to his boss in order to get a little customer service around here."

The terrorist dropped the road map on the floor in front of Julian and threatened, "Maybe you should leave before I call the police."

"What's the old saying about a good experience and you tell a few people but a bad experience and you tell a bunch of people?" Julian asked as he picked the road map off the floor and turned

around to exit. Again he used hand motions to reinforce his case - this time pointing toward the other terrorist sitting down seemingly engrossed in a magazine, "Look at how they just did me. You may want to reconsider doing business with an organization like this."

As soon as Julian left the building, the terrorist with the magazine replied, "You were going to call the police on him? Yeah right."

Pete reached the rooftop of the building. He collapsed there exhausted and weary.

"Well what do we have here?" A terrorist grinned at his partner. "Your friendly neighborhood -"

Normally Pete had a combination of options to deal with times like this and these types of threats ranging from semi- to fully-automatic weapons. Today however, he was equipped with a LUNC.

Its name stood for Lightweight UNtraceable Combo weapon. Pete demonstrated the single shot mode when squeezing the pressure sensitive trigger pad intermittently to loose two high percentage singular laser pulses that caught his assailants by surprise and cut them down. The weapon yielded no kickback making this truly a matter of point-and-click at the most lethal level. He had not been smoking too long, so his lungs and body were still in some semblance of (good) shape, but the bluff was effective.

It was time to move, so Pete caught sight of the rooftop door that led back inside the building and took off running. In one swift motion, he pulled open the door, swung inside, and tapped the trigger pad lightly to emit its built-in laser targeting beam. From there with his LUNC entering first, the steep staircase became

the next obstacle to overcome.

"What were you trying to go and pull some shi- like that for?" The terrorist with the magazine questioned. "Check and make sure he's gone."

"What's the situation?" The leader's voice asked over the handheld transceivers.

The terrorist left the receptionist's side and approached the revolving doors in order to peer out and see Julian skid off. He raised the handheld transceiver up to his lips and responded, "Calm now - he's gone."

The leader's voice ordered, "Make sure there are no more interruptions like that. I don't want the police to find out about what we're doing here."

The terrorist sitting down went back to the attention of his magazine while the other returned to his post beside the receptionist. He acknowledged, "You handled that well. You'll live a little longer."

Julian fingered his Ear-To-Mouth Com, "You got that, HQ? My compliments to Yori for the bugged bubblegum."

The dispatcher's voice once again came over Julian's Ear-To-Mouth Com louder than clear, "That's a confirmed hostage situation. Backup is about ten minutes out."

"The hostages don't have ten minutes," Julian replied while pulling a wild U-Turn in order to head back to the Ennead satellite office. The terrorists hid behind no masks. As soon as their business was concluded inside that building, the hostages became corpses.

The Second Earth Special Police Force Base

"Julian, wait - let's keep this legal," said the voice of the dispatcher belonging to the eighteen year-old intern, Secinol Singh or Sec for short. "I can have Commissioner Gyro authorize and email over a warrant within minutes." That last statement was met by a couple pats from a soft hand on his right shoulder.

Turning to look over his shoulder, Sec saw three men - only one of whom (the Commissioner) he knew. One of the other two he did not recognize was the person who had the cautionary hand on his shoulder.

The man spoke, "That won't be necessary. Don't detain them."

Sec then turned for confirmation of this request toward Commissioner Gyro who reluctantly nodded his approval.

Ennead Satellite Office

"Aye who're -"

Pete fired a cold, heartless, and unfeeling laser pulse into the face of the next terrorist he came across causing the person to tumble awkwardly down this flight of stairs. There the body lay in a contorted crumple directly in front of the entrance to the next closest floor.

Although this law enforcement lifestyle was exhilarating, it made Pete think he was starting to take too much pleasure in the

kill. The line separating the rugged cop from those he was tasked to stop was thin and blurring rapidly. The adrenaline was bleached away in favor of a new love for the reckless hunt. Perhaps by amassing the body count all the while relishing the effort, there was an opportunity to get into the mind-set of the killer who slew his wife.

Calculated recklessness was the answer in this situation because Pete was not about to get taken out before he had a chance to avenge his wife and get a little revenge (he meant closure) for himself. "Fu-- this running shi-."

The door was locked tightly, so Pete squeezed and held down the LUNC's trigger pad in order to fire a continuous stream of laser pulses that unlocked it the only other way he knew how. Calling the LUNC a weapon was an understatement as it was clearly its own arsenal - capable of one million laser pulses per laser fluid cartridge.

It did not take long for the terrorists to figure out who was actually using the elevator. Since they still remained in control of the building's security systems, the ability to immediately ascertain the destination of its first stop allowed them to post up positions outside the fifteenth floor entrance. A bullet barrage riddled the walls of the car.

"Hold your fire!" The order was greatly muffled by a massive waste of gunshots. "Hold your fire, da--it!" It was surprising the elevator's doors were even able to open at all after that display of destruction. The terrorist who gave the orders ran in and signaled for another to hold the doors open. The light for the sixteenth floor had been activated.

"I saw this in a movie once," the terrorist holding open the

doors announced.

The terrorist inside the elevator reloaded his weapon. "So have I." He pointed upward, pulled the trigger, and maneuvered it in precise circles as to not shoot the elevator's cables, but this caused the top lights to blow out with violent sparks. "Whoever was up there is dead now."

The floor melted as the terrorist inside the elevator was blasted off his feet from beneath the car! The terrorist holding the doors open jumped backward allowing those doors to slide closed and the decimated elevator to lift.

In battle, the sounds of weaponry were a symphony of stratagem that allowed the discerning listener to gather all types of tactical information. Pete merely needed to know a reasonable number of adversaries he was about to tangle with but could also recite the weapons' models in his sleep from the tune of their previous barrage which had echoed with perfect clarity overhead. And really, he only needed to make the terrorists become cautious - hesitant. Much to his dismay, this was not a seek and destroy mission. There were still hostages to account for.

While holding onto the bottom of the elevator, Pete angled his LUNC upward as the car continued to rise, fired a continuous stream of pulses that tore chunks out the fifteenth floor doors, and managed to take out at least three terrorists in the process. Surely there would be retaliation, so rather than ascend passively into it, the rugged cop slid down to the seventh floor along a cable and forced open its doors. Performing a forward roll as an entrance made him as difficult a target as possible although no guards were present.

Julian needed not to worry about his second approach

becoming suspect because he figured Pete was already in the thick of things with a wrench lodged well into the terrorists' gears sufficiently gumming up their works. He pulled his own LUNC and leveled the glass doors with streams of laser pulses. "I changed my mind. I'm back, and I brought the Better Business Bureau with me."

"Oh shi-!" The terrorist Julian had problems with earlier was caught totally by surprise. He had gone to reach for the receptionist to use as a Human shield, but she was already jumpy because of current events and had long since hit the deck.

This gave Julian a clear opportunity to offer a singular laser pulse. It pegged the terrorist in his gun arm spinning the person around before the delivery of another shot to the back put him down.

The terrorist previously seated at the waiting area would have loved to have completed a crossfire had his partner not been taken out in such short order. Julian rushed inside and dove to the ground in anticipation of him.

Immediately the terrorist went on the move as well utilizing whatever piece of furniture or freestanding plant or architectural column he could as a means to gain some semblance of cover in order to mount the counterattack. He shot. A couple bullets flew from a handgun that, with the speed of the action, was too difficult for Julian to decipher.

Then Julian shot. While rolling, he let loose a spread of laser pulses that did not even need to be accurate. With the LUNC, 'close' counted as with grenades or Horseshoes. Of course, Julian could have simply fired wildly and netted the same result, but his discipline was meant to prevent innocents from ever being harmed by stray shots.

The terrorist fell from behind the column. Laser char wounds and brutal piercings left him bleeding badly - deceased.

"What floor?" Julian called out sternly.

"Sixth Floor!" The receptionist responded back instantly as she hurried to her feet in order to rush out the front door.

"Thank you so much!"

Julian offered a smile and then ran for the elevator while fingering his Ear-To-Mouth Com with his gun hand, "Did you get that, Pete? Sixth floor!"

"Fu--," Pete replied, "I'm one floor off plus pinned down." He kicked over a sofa for a barricade. The antique lost face value, and the rugged cop lost time as terrorists blocked his path to the stairs and eventually the hostages. They were starting to respect the LUNC though.

Firing a few pulses over the top of the sofa and allowing it to obliterate objects unlucky enough to have been in the way caused the terrorists to hesitate, pause, and rethink their strategy. After all, they had no way of knowing how many people infiltrated the building as the LUNC served up some scathing, never-before-seen artillery that appeared to be coming from a much heavier, shoulder-mounted rig capable of tossing out rapid-fire, armor-piercing rounds rather than the surprisingly lightweight handgun no more than five inches long, three inches high, and a little less than an inch wide.

"Fifth or seventh floor?" Julian asked. "Man, this shi- is suspect. Where's our backup?"

Making the best of a bad situation, Pete lit another

cigarette before firing additional pulses over the top of the kicked-over sofa. "Seventh. An even better question: Where are all these hostages?"

The trademarked ding sounded.

Julian popped out the elevator and used a crossfire attack with Pete completing the massacre. The only things moving beside them were the smoke that dissipated from their barrage and the dust the force of their attack kicked up. Bodies were everywhere, but to this point, they were thankfully not among the ones laid out.

It was not like Julian needed to state the obvious, but he felt the need to say this anyway, "We're being played."

"Far be it from us to stop the game," Pete urged them onward.

So no sooner said than were Pete and Julian back in the stairwell charging toward the sixth floor entrance. The rugged cop stood with his back parallel to the door on its right side facing his partner who fired off two pulses from the stairs: One took out the locked doorknob while the other took care of the locking mechanism at the top of the door.

Pete slid to the left of the door still facing Julian, reached inside the gouge that once held the doorknob, and flung it open. This was enough to give his partner a decent, initial view of the inside meriting a downward head nod to signal things were as clear as they were going to get for the time being. The rugged cop rushed in.

Backing Pete up, Julian hurried down the stairs and threw himself up against the rugged cop's former position with his LUNC pointed over toward the right of the entrance. Both had their laser targeting sights on lashing the rather calm air with red beams that picked up a disturbing amount of dust particles.

Pete kept his LUNC pointed in one direction while scanning the rest of the periphery by cautiously turning his head. "It's clear!"

"Welcome to cubicle he--," Julian said in deference to his past life as he officially entered the sixth floor by stepping through the doorway. "If I was the ringleader and wanted to be found, I'd pick the executive's office."

"Lead on," Pete encouraged.

Despite the convoluted floor plan that left both Pete and Julian to wonder where people actually came up with the logic for the cubicle distribution let alone who could have possibly approved this type of layout, they found the office in question.

Upon entry, a very familiar voice heard across various press conferences from radio and television spoke up, "Pete Rogue and Julian Kazar, welcome. Although I'm disappointed you'd only neutralized thirty-seven percent of my operatives, I am impressed you made it this far and still live." The man turned his attention away from a laptop listing the statistics of this little exercise so he could meet the gun-toting gazes of the Police Force officers.

"You motherfu--er!" Pete exclaimed as he lunged forward in a rage with his LUNC aimed at the man's head.

Upon instantly assessing the situation and its implications, Julian tackled Pete to the floor in order to prevent this altercation from escalating matters any further out of control than things had already become over the past few weeks. Probation was an ugly thing when it came to a partnership because, more often than not, the punishment dragged the partner down along with the person on the hot seat. Whether that meant awful shifts or mediocre assignments, he had to experience all the reprimands with the rugged cop as they were 'partners'. This was a bit of what

could be referred to as checks and balances and a nuisance to be sure, but killing the person in front of them was tantamount to committing suicide. "Hold on, Pete!"

Wrestling was not Pete's strong suit and his intense rage shifted to a bitter frustration when he shouted, "Back up off me!" Julian had successfully gotten the rugged cop's arm twisted into a position that pointed the LUNC away from the man sitting before them.

The object of this emotion (and the subsequent reaction displayed) stood up to approach and address the Police Force officers. The man's name was Stalkord - the leader of Death Corps, and although he was not responsible for murdering Pete's wife, he had managed the mercenary who did.

CRITICALITY - THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

02: Feat of Fury

Initially that scene at the Ennead building was not worth revisiting. It was quite possibly the most dangerous ruse Pete and Julian had ever heard of let alone seen or been unfortunate enough to have been a part of. How reckless? How many lives were lost in this exercise? How could the Second Earth Special Police Force tacitly go along with this? Sanction this? And to what ends? What lengths was the Space Force willing to go to amuse their leadership and further appease their dominance?

Pete and Julian were left with so many questions - left to ponder (that was), so at least for now, returning to the Second Earth Special Police Force Base was low on the priority list. A breach of trust as deep as this often called for retribution of some sort, and they were strongly considering taking that brand new car and continuing to drive. Ironically if the Space Force, the Second Earth Special Police Force, and Ennead Tech Corp were (all three) in bed together as some sort of demented ménage à trois with unfathomable implications, it was doubtful the Mustang would get far enough away.

And what of Ennead Tech Corp and their ever-growing part in this? Although Pete's and Julian's lips were not moving, their thoughts were running wild trying to figure out what had just happened, they should be doing currently, and could possibly be next. Replaying the scene in their minds made them realize they had just been hit by a bus:

"I'm sincerely sorry for your loss, but your anger

is misplaced," Stalkord explained.

Pete continued to struggle against Julian's grip while screaming out, "You won't give up your mercenary Retsepar, so that makes you just as responsible!"

It was not Stalkord's intention to make this any harder on Pete than it already was nor belittle his position, but the law was on the Death Corps Leader's side, and that needed to be made clear if this conversation was at all to continue sensibly, "No jury in all the Terran or Quadron Systems would hold me accountable or personally liable for your situation. You should be directing the majority of this energy toward the person who hired Retsepar to eliminate your wife."

Pete started to cool off enough Julian felt justified in loosening the grip on him. The rugged cop sat up and replied sarcastically, "Yeah guns don't kill people; people kill people."

"Exactly," Stalkord concurred with the notion.

"What the fu-- do we do?" Julian asked honestly.

"How much power does your car have left?" Pete replied. As he leaned back in his seat, the rugged cop realized this was going to take some more thought.

The one thing they did not want to start questioning was Commissioner Gyro's involvement in all this. There were a lot of bad and questionable police at the Second Earth Special Police Force Base who tended to overshadow the merits of those on the up-and-up, but the Commissioner was not one of them. He was the prototypical do-gooder complete with a noble honor code and an unquestioned moral high ground. Perhaps rather than relegating

their contemplation to speculation, Pete and Julian should start there. But yet and still, this was all too unbelievable.

The Second Earth Special Police Force Base

"Your men did well," Chico O'Reilly complimented. He was one of two Space Force operatives currently posturing in front of Commissioner Gyro.

The other was Murk Wreosir. "They may've just won your Police Force a Space Force security contract."

What these two lacked in rank, they made up in clout being members of Leader One: Jerry Stuyvescent's personal guard. It almost did not get any higher up in the Space Force chain of command than that, so the pressures befalling the Commissioner were significant.

"Let's leave Sec to his duties," but Commissioner Gyro had been around the bend a few times having served in cesspool law enforcement situations throughout the United States (back on Earth) when the Space Force was first coming to dominance, "and speak more privately."

The three men exited the dispatcher station and continued their conversation on foot.

Chico replied, "You don't seem too pleased with the news."

Commissioner Gyro was a big man standing at well over six feet tall, and it was all muscle. The only thing that might have been more commanding than his physical stature happened to be his stoic voice - all parts wise, charismatic, and deep. "I've been through this back on Earth, and the only reason I didn't call off

your little exercise was because my men were already engaged in combat. In doing so, I'd have cost them their lives. Let's make this clear: My authority will not be usurped again."

"Disrespect was never our intent," Murk assured, "but we needed to make sure your best Police Force officers were in fact the best. Had you called off this little exercise or they perished, the Space Force would've known your Police Force wasn't suited for the job we were about to put before it."

"Do you think I give a shi- about what the Space Force thinks when the lives of my Police Force officers are at stake?" The Commissioner asked.

Chico smiled, "We know you don't, and that's why we needed to take the measures we did in order to gather those untainted test results."

Murk admitted, "It's not all bad. You know as well as the Space Force there's untold amounts of corruption throughout the Second Earth Special Police Force. It's unavoidable whenever new settlements pop up or alterations in government are set to occur. There's increased opportunity. And opportunity knocks loudest for the corrupt. I realize things could've gone down differently on Earth, but look upon this twice in a lifetime chance as a way to root out the bad seeds growing organically within your Police Force."

"As much as we appreciated Death Corps' assistance back on Earth - back in the day, the Space Force wants to move away from that type of practice," Chico announced. "There's too much exposure, and we're powerful enough we no longer need to resort to such archaic tactics. I believe it's because of an old adage about bees, honey, and a flamethrower."

Pete straightened his clothes as he returned to his feet. "What you just work for Ennead Tech Corp now?"

Stalkord smirked, "Work for them? I own them."

"I thought you were running things with Death Corps back on Earth," Julian said.

"It's all about diversity in the ever-changing marketplace, so I keep a little stock in mercenaries and a little stock in weapons technology." Stalkord went back around his desk, took a seat, and went to typing away on the laptop's keyboard before stating, "You go where the money is, and the Space Force tends to be where the money is, so I'll follow."

"You used scrubs for this exercise," Pete deduced.

Stalkord nodded, "If they managed to take you out or survive, they'd net themselves a job in either Death Corps or Ennead Tech Corp. My mercenaries' presence isn't the largest out on Second Earth, but it's still no less effective."

The relationship between the Space Force and Death Corps had been solidified across decades of brutal business dealings that mutually enriched each party financially and politically. One piece which did not fit, however, was Stalkord's involvement and rapid ascension in Ennead Tech Corp, so Julian inquired, "How did you net this job?"

"I thought it was implied," Stalkord laughed.

The Space Force was a corporation that grew to such prominence it took over and displaced all the governments of Earth. Absolutely the last thing it was going to allow to happen was for some upstart company like Ennead Tech Corp to do the same. Their

taking out of Death Corps contracts had worked to deadly perfection in the past, so with this burgeoning company being responsible for quite a bit of the technological advancements seen popping up in more and more bases, vehicles, and weaponry, the most hostile of takeovers became a no-brainer.

In order to appease businesses, as if the Space Force even needed to, they stuck with the hands-off dealings of old where the private and public sectors remained separated. For the most part, it kept normal everyday society out their day-to-day dealings, so the societal status quo made sense. But they wanted Ennead Tech Corp to be much closer with the amount of business dealings going on between the parties. Installing Stalkord - their most trusted partner (going back decades) as Chief Executive Officer would certainly do that.

Cipher Coliseum

About the only thing the Space Force did not have its hands in was the entertainment industry. Correspondents were posted at every possible news outlet to ensure the correct spin was delivered to every angle of concern, but entertainment kept the minds of the masses off matters altogether.

With a capacity for one hundred thousand and a high profile martial arts tournament taking place, Sylvia Lenorox (of the Second Earth Special Police Force) and Vim Cobolgo (her rookie partner) helped to oversee security.

Sylvia absolutely loved these types of assignments because they often morphed into free passes for some of the most legendary

events. Once an all clear status was established, she normally had a pretty decent view of whatever concert, convention, or sport was going on at the time.

The Second Earth Special Police Force dedicated ten Police Force officers to the internal security of every event, and as Sylvia explained to Vim, "Ten is more than sufficient to secure a venue of this size. Outside these LUNC's, nobody can get weapons in. Fissile materials are also flagged at the ticketing entrance areas, so all tailgating supplies and even lighters must be left outside - no threat of bombs there. Everything from the drugs to the liquor people try to smuggle into these events is picked up by the ticket entrance sensors. And thanks to our friends at the Space Force, if anything gets out of hand, we simply just pull the tape recorded through the courtesy of Solstice Satellite's spy cameras. Let it never be said there's such a thing as privacy."

"It seems like everything has been thought out," Vim said.

"Yes but you never want to drop your guard," Sylvia advised, "because a riot situation will tax our ten person setup - eleven with you tagging along. In that instance, no more than two of us should ever engage the brawl at any given point in time until backup arrives in case the ploy happens to be a decoy meant to divert us from another sector. Again there's nothing anybody can get away with since big brother is out there in the cosmos looking over our shoulder, but if they feel the need to try, the LUNC on your hip (as a last resort) can lay this entire place down ten times over. And today, there are eleven of us, so I'd say Cipher Coliseum is fairly secure."

Overlooking the venue as the next match was set to begin, Vim leaned with his arms across the safety railing to one of the upper levels. "That Shokan warrior looks unstoppable. If I was a

betting man, I'd put it all on their fighter to take the tournament. I heard they have dojos popping up all around the universe."

Sylvia disagreed while pointing toward the center of the football field-sized ring. "No way, do you see that guy?"

"The Shokan warrior's opponent?" Vim asked.

"He's hot," Sylvia announced, "and he will be the father of my child."

Vim laughed, "I suppose you can probably scrape up what's left."

"Ecleezy Conus, here, bringing all the martial arts action you can handle live on WZZZ! Tonight we'll showcase action from a lower circuit of up-and-coming fighters seeking not just their first (sanctioned) mixed martial arts tournament win but their first universal ranking that comes as a result of overall victory here.

The fighters look to be warmed up. Without further ado, I'll turn it over to the in-ring announcer to get this first match's introductions out the way."

Dressed nicely from head to toe in a tuxedo, the announcer projected her voice into the microphone for everybody to hear, "Good evening all you standing room only attendees at Cipher Coliseum! We'd also like to welcome those from around the universe watching these matches tonight via feeds provided by our broadcaster, WZZZ.

The following match is scheduled for one fall. To my right, fighting out of Second Earth, representing the Shokan Discipline, and wearing the black trunks, we have Sanjuana Woody!"

Sanjuana raised his right fist to accept the praise and began to pump it in tune with the emphasized, two syllable chants of the word 'Shokan' originating from the massive crowd. He was clean-cut and polished - a disciplined fighter with a string of uncounted victories over his peers during training that had propelled him to the top of his respective fight class and the ceding here tonight.

The in-ring announcer continued, "And to my left - also fighting out of Second Earth but representing the Dyoogie Discipline and wearing the rainbow-colored trunks, we have Billy Smith!"

Billy's reception was lukewarm at best. He was just about as ripped as his opponent but brought spiky hair, an earring in his left ear, and a whole lot of attitude to the match. Tearing through competitions from the grade school level all the way up to the collegiate level would probably fortify anybody with a healthy dose of earned confidence. While jogging in place, the Djibouti Clan student threw a few warm-up punches.

The referee signaled for each fighter to come together in the center of the field for their final instructions. They both began their trek from across the opposite ends of Cipher Coliseum that actually took an awkward amount of time when compared to other fights confined to a much smaller and more enclosed ring space.

"The Shokan have been making some definite waves as of late in tournaments across the universe, and you can tell Sanjuana brought his cheering section along with him. This battle pits the crowd favorite up against the resurgence of a previously thought-to-be-defunct style created by the late Master Dyoogie. This fight holds promise, so I wouldn't

necessarily be too quick to count out Billy just yet."

The in-ring announcer put the microphone to the referee's lips as he motioned with both of his precautionary-gloved hands for the fighters to come together in order for him to be able to deliver the final instructions directly to them, "This match consists of three five-minute rounds and is scheduled for one fall. This means if someone has not fallen after the initial three rounds are up, there will be successive five-minute overtime periods until a victor is decided in battle. Hitting below the belt and eye-gouging, although dishonorable, are completely legal. No holds are barred, and pre-registered weapons are allowed. If a death is to occur, although unfortunate, it'll result in an undisputed victory being declared for the last remaining fighter left standing. Salute your opponent and come out fighting."

"Here we go! Sanjuana and Billy touch palms. They back away and start to encircle one another each looking for an opening - a means to strike first effectively while avoiding the other's deadly counterattack. I can already tell from the poise of these two competitors we're in for a slugfest.

Billy opens the proceedings with a quick right jab to check the distance, but Sanjuana isn't having any of that. He goes in full force with a flurry of punches.

Backtracking, Billy's defense is strong, so no damage was done on this exchange. With a nod of mutual respect, it seems like he's starting to understand his opponent may be a little more offensive-minded than the Djibouti Clan student originally thought. Wait, with a

smile and two wafting hands, he cockily entices Sanjuana to carry on the attack.

It looks like Sanjuana is going to oblige by delivering a spin kick Billy ducks under.

Billy comes up with a left uppercut Sanjuana catches in mid punch. The Djibouti Clan student isn't finished yet and goes for a simple right sweep his opponent easily dances over the top of.

The crowd rises to their feet as Billy pushes into the body of Sanjuana recovering from the sweep attempt and thrusting a knee toward his opponent's gut with the same leg!

Sanjuana lets go of Billy's left arm at the instant of impact seemingly stifling the blow because of the subtle alteration in the Djibouti Clan student's center of gravity.

With a devastating two-fisted punch to the chest, Sanjuana sends Billy off his feet flying backward! The Djibouti Clan student tumbles to a halt some five yards from his previous position causing a divot in the field from his punishing travels.

As if utilizing the sixth of his senses, Billy rolls over onto his back and kips up with the assistance of only his left arm showing incredible awareness in avoidance of the hawkish attack of a downward left punch that carried the velocity of the full extension Sanjuana used to bear down sneakily upon him."

"Your man is clearly being outmatched," Vim replied.

Sylvia countered, "Something that'll improve with time as a Police Force officer is your power of perception."

Vim was skeptical, "How do you mean?"

"This fight is already over," Sylvia alerted.

They turned their attention back to the field.

"I don't believe what I just saw, and the hush that's befallen this crowd all but assures they concur with the notion. Even right before my very own eyes. Folks, this crowd of over one hundred thousand has been silenced like the crumple that is Sanjuana Woody.

Billy managed to nimbly snap off a short left sweep from his tippy toes after the kip dislodged Sanjuana's left arm from the now apparently errant attack and caused the Djibouti Clan student's opponent to lose balance plus fall forward into the full force of his right fist.

Folks, Sanjuana's arm went to the left and Billy's punch made his face fly to the right. The velocity of this attack caused Sanjuana's body to bounce upon impacting the ground.

Whereas Sanjuana lays in a hurt - pressed into a crater on the ground of his own bodily impression, Billy does a solitary push-up to get to his feet and await the referee's count.

Six, seven, eight, nine - the referee shakes his head and goes for Billy Smith's arm in order to raise it and declare him the victor! The crowd, after catching its collective breath, is now going crazy.

Everybody loves an underdog. Unfortunately for Billy, this match is probably the last time he's ever going to be considered anything but a favorite. Certainly here, the Djibouti Clan student has made a case for his becoming

the odds-on favorite to win it all as he makes his way off the field - set to advance to the next unlucky opponent who draws him."

The Second Earth Special Police Force Base

Commissioner Gyro now sat behind the desk of his office with the Space Force operatives before him and wondered, "What all is entailed concerning our involvement with the Space Force?"

"Well for starters," Murk requested, "if you can spare the space, an office would be nice. We plan to spend a considerable amount of time here familiarizing ourselves with the top members of your team and learning your protocols."

Chico added, "Understanding can go both ways, so it'd be nice to immerse ourselves in this culture, first, before bombarding your Police Force with what'll ultimately be expected of them."

"You now choose to show consideration and restraint?" The Commissioner laughed. "To what ends, gentlemen?"

Murk answered the question both pointedly and directly, "Leader One is planning his first trip to Second Earth since moving the majority of the Space Force fleet to the Quadron System. He'll be leaving the safety and security of Solstice Satellite, and it's up to us to keep him protected. So I must ask that you pardon us for the elaborate precautions. Simply put, if we screw this thing up, every single one of us is dead."

Cipher Coliseum

"Are you sure we should even be down here?" Vim questioned uneasily turning his head from side to side in keeping a lookout for anybody who could possibly be approaching.

Sylvia had brought them to the locker room area well within the stadium's innards. The majority of the fighters were upstairs either scoping out any potential competition or warming up in preparation for their upcoming matches. This left the area well-vacated to suit her purposes, and she planned on making good use of this fifteen-minute break.

Peeking outside the locker room, Sylvia responded, "Vim, when was the last time a Police Force officer ever wrote a speeding ticket for him- or herself? Yet we all speed, correct? Get with it, officer." The door closed gently.

Vim crossed his arms and leaned up against the wall stating defensively that, "I don't speed."

Billy lay on his back atop a bench with headphones covering his ears and his eyes closed seemingly oblivious to the surroundings. The only thing between him and nudity was a towel wrapped around his lower body.

With both the tournament's event program and a pen in hand, Sylvia approached stealthily and reached them out toward Billy who snapped his left hand up to intercept her left wrist.

While holding onto the grasp of Sylvia's wrist, Billy sat up, took a gander at the event program, pulled the headphones down around his neck, and said, "Do you want my autograph or something else?" He had never done that sort of thing under these circumstances.

Sylvia replied, "You're not getting into my pants as easily as you knocked out that Shokan warrior." And apparently, he never would. "However my number's on there. I'll give you a sporting chance to impress me. Good luck in your next few matches, Billy." She snatched her arm back, turned, and left the Djibouti Clan student alone with his thoughts.

A smile curled up on the left side of Billy's lips as he peered down at the name on the event program, "Sylvia," and then returned his gaze to focus on what or who was walking out the door.

"Guys, this is Sec. I'm sorry about the last dispatch. There was nothing I could do. Space Force presence is surprisingly thick at HQ right now.

This time we've got an Actual. I thought you'd be particularly interested in this one. It's another social networking (web site) murder."

Arriving at the crime scene was like a cruel reminder of Pete's most recent, personal past. While Julian made sure he was amply able to maneuver the Mustang around all the squad cars gumming up the adjacent streets in order to find a parking space, he managed to look over at his partner from time to time checking to see if the rugged cop was alright. These scenes were not easy in the first place but having actually been involved in one, themselves, made this even harder.

Calmly and silently, Pete and Julian walked up to the taped-off apartment complex. The only people aside from Police Force officers even allowed close to the premises were the owners. All tenants whether asleep or returning home that night were inexplicably detained, delayed, and displaced. Controlling the situation happened to be at the utmost top in terms of priority as far as forensics was concerned with each tenant warned to leave a number where they could be reached for further questioning and advised to not have the Second Earth Special Police Force come looking for them.

Flashing credentials, Pete and Julian each ducked under the yellow tape and immediately headed inside and upstairs to check out the actual scene. It was a scene of controlled chaos with Police Force officers gathering evidence, scanning for fingerprints, snapping off photos, communicating with other agencies, breaking the news to next of kin, grimacing at the sight of the woman who lay twisted half in and half out the shower, and ultimately pitying the person who had to clean this up. The rugged cop and his

partner did not need to look away instead choosing to focus in on the kill in order to take it all in. They had not been a party to this exact type of murder (personally) before, but it was close enough. This was eerily similar in so many ways.

"I'm in this guy's head," Pete concluded. "I can see him coming up those stairs after slipping in behind someone who'd just exited while pretending to be talking on his smartphone."

Julian simply stared at Pete in awe of these lofty pronouncements, yet there was no denying his partner's change in demeanor. Confidence and surety were abundant in every step, but those steps mimicked the personality of a maniac. Ironically he could not even imagine Retsepar was as equally fluent and rehearsed in movement. Allowing the rugged cop to profile and project in this manner was possibly going to be the only way they could get close to this mercenary turned lunatic.

Pete was having a full conversation with himself, but nobody was on the other end, "No. Retsepar's smartphone was used to call the victim beforehand. This gave him the chance to be so much closer to her than ever before. He apologized for calling a wrong number while continuing to climb the stairs. She was polite - so inviting, just about to hop in the shower.

I bet the victim was hoping to hear from her friend on the other end of Retsepar's call. Male, female - I'm unsure who she wanted it to be, but it doesn't discount the fact the woman was in a good mood probably because she was either heading out for a night on the town or taking in a late matinee or maybe even having someone over. He could hear the showerhead running in the background. It was going to be perfect this time - perfectly executed. She never would've heard his entry that way being all up in shower."

"Go on," Julian politely urged. This was amazing.

"There was a witness from room 204 who saw him in the hall," Pete said through a clipped index finger and thumb pressed pensively up against his lips.

Julian hailed the nearest Police Force officer he could find and suggested, "We need to get a couple of us on whoever resides in apartment 204. Hurry."

The Police Force officer nodded affirmatively and scurried off for the purposes of making that suggestion into a reality. Pete and Julian were among the highest-ranking Police Force officers on this scene and arguably, albeit by a fluke of fate, the most experienced in dealing with Retsepar. Needless to have said, their word on the matter was law, and there was not a Police Force officer outside Internal Affairs who would question their handling of the situation.

One needed only ask the question of what a person would have done if the roles had been reversed and could find a measure of comfort in the answer surrounding the lengths Pete and Julian were going to crack this case. An unwritten directive also happened to have been passed around the Second Earth Special Police Force Base stating Retsepar was to be shot first since, on this, there were no questions as cop killers and killers of cops' family members were always lumped together into the same category on the collective law enforcement shi- list.

Pete continued, "It was so easy - so easy this time. It was like Retsepar had been here before - like he had run some sort of previous reconnaissance or had cameras installed to spy on the victim.

That wasn't possible, but Retsepar knew everything nonetheless: The chip on the favorite mug in the cupboard, the

creek in the door which (I might add) took extra caution by him to close, rugs hadn't been replaced yet, but painting was done and would have to suffice for now. Plus even the exact location of the bathroom was known so he could just go right there and not waste any time. The victim's life was vivid like a picture or an open eBook."

This next part Julian would stop if it became too graphic. He was well aware Pete did not possess any super powers other than his bitter obsession to kill Retsepar. For that to occur, the rugged cop needed to become the killer in order to understand the mind-set and derive any sort of pattern from the madness which might eventually lead to bringing the criminal down.

Always reactive, it was the anticipation they all sought, and selfishly sitting back to witness Pete's continued deterioration became the agonizing step that would inch them terrifyingly closer into the mind of a madman in hopes of somehow getting ahead of this carnage. Whether it was undercover, under the pressures of the job, or under this awkward mind-set the rugged cop was trying to achieve, Julian realized there would come a breaking point as with all other Police Force officers - a subtle yet distinct place where his partner would have gone in too deep it would be nearly impossible to pull him out.

The reason Pete never so much as reached such a place was because this last part was normally where he psychologically decided to shut out the resultant events. As badly as the rugged cop had dealt (or avoided dealing) with his wife's murder, he did not want to relive matters, just assumed the worst, and let things be at that.

"What is it?" Julian did not know Pete had concluded his work for the evening.

"It's just hard," Pete said as he dropped to a crouch overlooking the corpse. The coroner was not yet on site, so the victim's eyes remained open and uneasily warm in their soft yet frozen gaze. Watching the peacefulness only death could provide, the rugged cop made a silent, mental promise to her he would get Retsepar.

While shaking his head piteously, Julian approached and put a hand on Pete's shoulder. And in doing everything to keep his voice from cracking because of the feelings of helplessness toward the situation, he replied, "I can't even imagine."

The O'Reilly Household

Chico's personal life included a wife and a warm meal when he returned home from work and not because she cooked it either. Lupita O'Reilly was a career woman who outpaced her husband financially, so their combined income was significant, and they were able to afford domestic service. Their nightly meal had become a pleasurable ritual of unwinding they both looked forward to and made the most of.

Although Space Force jobs were most prominent, financial positions (such as what Lupita held) were also quite prevalent. She was fortunate to have a career featuring hours that revolved around the universal markets. This made her schedule predictable allowing ample time for fiscal research and often causing her to be the first one home at the dinner table as was the case tonight. Work for Chico finished when his work was completed necessitating an open-ended schedule and some late nights. Sometimes there were

overnights, but he never made an entrance without a kiss to his wife's forehead whether she was sitting at the dinner table or asleep in bed. Tonight was to be no different, and with a kiss, their night's conversation began.

Chico slung his suit coat over the back of his chair and sat down as the help began to serve up a salad appetizer. Not even all that hungry, he started things off with a question, "How was your day?"

"With your Space Force beginning to sell off more and more of their assets to the private sector, I was hoping my counterparts would see the signal as a positive indicator for future growth. Thus the markets would rally," Lupita explained. "Apparently this wasn't to be the case."

"Ha," Chico rethought his position on the salad when he saw chicken in there, dug into a healthy portion of it, and then spoke with his mouth full, "they're not my Space Force. I just work for them."

Lupita continued, "My concern is mostly for the overall market. Investors are confused right now as to what the Space Force actually has jurisdiction over. There's no clear-cut separation between corporations and government, so the long-term growth of the markets is suffering because of it. But that's just me being pragmatic. In any situation whenever somebody is losing money, somebody else has to be making money. I think this is where I really excel in finding that person at these key moments of economic downturn."

Holding out his fork for emphasis, Chico clarified, "So in layman's terms, does this mean you had a good day?"

"I grew my portfolio by five whole percentage points in one day," Lupita smiled.

"My girl!" Chico complimented. "I only wish I had as good of news, but you know what - I take that back. It's not all bad. Murk and I are now based out the Second Earth Special Police Force Base here on the planet, so we no longer need to fly out to Solstice Satellite each morning for work."

Excited for Chico, Lupita blurted out, "That's great!"

A little more reserved in his elation, Chico lowered the expectations, "Well we're going to have to get the Police Force up to speed with Space Force policies and procedures. If you can believe it, my days are going to be considerably longer until that happens."

"At least now, I can stop by to see you on your lunch break. The Second Earth Special Police Force Base is in Atro City, and their location isn't very far from my office," Lupita replied making the best of the situation.

"I hadn't thought about it that way," Chico admitted, but he did like the sound of things.

Lupita swirled the wine in her glass before taking a swig and stating, "It's my job. I'm all about finding the arbitrage opportunities."

Pete's House

By contrast, Pete's personal life included an empty house and tortured memories of despair. He sat in the passenger seat of the Mustang dreading his having to return to that place and eventual sleep.

Pete's dreams had been shattered, and his nightmares were

now reality. Short of putting a laser pulse in Retsepar's face, he could not fathom how things could get any better as retribution was really the only thing left the rugged cop reasoned he had to live for.

"Do you need me to come in?" Julian asked. "I'm good with the couch."

Pete exited the car and replied, "Can you meet me back here at six in the morning?"

Feeling much more reassured to Pete's mental state, Julian nodded, "Of course." Once the seemingly renewed, all-business rugged cop stepped safely away from his car, he sped off for a home of his own.

In fact, Pete had not slept, so when six in the morning came around, he found he had done everything else but sleep: Shave, shower, eat, watch television - the list went on and on. Wired as his body seemed to be, the rugged cop presently sat on the front stoop awaiting Julian's arrival. As his partner pulled up, he stood and mentioned, "You're late."

"First of all," Julian corrected with a smile, "you've gotten us how many demerits for being tardy? Now we're - what is it: Seven hours and fifty-nine minutes early for the shift, and you wanna hate? Boy, don't have me drive off!"

The Second Earth Special Police Force Base

Pete and Julian's first stop was to see the Second Earth Special Police Force's Engineering Team Lead, Yori Curch. A tailor

of gadgetry and an all-around tinkerer, Yori often provided either devices or technical insight on a number of various, different matters. They were hoping he could shed some light on these social networking web site (dubbed SoNet) murders.

Yori's work area was trashed with a place for everything and everything in some place - certainly not organized in the slightest. But with the way his mind worked, it made sense. At the end of a long day, this was all that mattered. And he put in some hours.

There was no secret why Pete selected such an early time to get into the office. Yori's services were in high demand, so as a compromise to the Police Force, he extended his hours by moving in. Sure time was allotted for sleep, but after about four hours from two to six in the morning which was capable of achieving a significant amount of REM, availability became fair game.

"Pete - Julian, good morning!" Yori greeted.

Julian pulled up a chair he could find that was, itself, caked in a pile of unrecognizable components and gear. "What's up?"

Yori explained, "Ah not too much. Just another day at work, I suppose."

"Did you get that computer from the crime scene last night?" Pete asked. Almost gruff, his focus was clear.

"Yes - yes," Yori answered as he took no malice from the insistence of Pete's urgency. Pointing toward Julian's feet he said, "Hand me that cord right there."

"This one?" Julian inquired as he literally just picked some cord off the ground. There was cabling everywhere.

Yori sat pensively for a moment but then decided, "Yes that'll work. I can make it work."

Julian took a gander at the back wall where the majority of the cables led and noticed a shelving system with desktops and laptops on top of other desktops and laptops. He was even able to make out some sort of networking devices in there like routers and firewalls among other things, but part of him wondered what would happen if the base's electrician, some random wiring specialist, or a Space Force building and zoning code officer were to walk in here.

Plugging that cable into what appeared to be a switch and doing some lite work of typing on the keyboard before Yori allowed him to bring up the data Pete sought. He explained, "These SoNet murders are gruesome at best, but I believe wholly preventable at worst. It's absurd the amount of information both volunteered and contained on a social networking web site. Some of these places rival the databases of the Space Force with the sheer amount of personal information which tends to be readily accessible. You know when people wake up, go to work, are sick, go to bed, and have a bad day. Plus there are pictures and résumés to go along with the narrative in support of the vanity. Frankly I'm surprised there aren't many more of these homicides. All some anal-retentive psychopath has to do is latch onto a person's private-made-public life, and you have me looking through yet another computer - trying to figure out what went so horribly wrong."

Pete nodded his agreement with the observation and asked, "Can you determine any sort of pattern from this latest victim's lifestyle? Certainly there's got to be some sort of paper trail: People she'd befriended or were following her, connections, etcetera."

"Unfortunately," Yori divulged, "there's an infinite amount of possibilities to that as far as degrees of separation are

concerned. If we really want to pinpoint this type of data, I'd suggest you subpoena the records from the various SoNet domains she happened to be a member of. I can certainly pull the appropriate parties' contact information to get you pointed in the right direction."

Julian replied, "Sounds good."

Turning around in an out of place yet comfy brown leather swivel chair that looked like it belonged more in some house's warmly-colored den than this dank area of the Second Earth Special Police Force Base, Yori needed to say something else, "I've been keeping a database of my own for cross-reference purposes as far as all this is concerned. Now I'm assuming Retsepar is smart and will've unsubscribed from a victim's page before carrying out the brutality so as to not have such actions traced back to him by my efforts, but it's much, much harder to go into his victims' computers and erase the sites they belong to. I'm not saying this is overly substantial information, but it's vetted information as in I believe I've narrowed down the sheer number of possible sites this freak is working from. The information on this slate computer," he reached the device over to Julian from off the clutter on his desk, "is retroactive obviously. If he signs up for some new site moving forward and kills again, the data doesn't support that type of behavioral pattern. But everything from familial to personal to business relationships is compiled there. It's a data dump, so my job is to find out the enemies, the deceased, and the reclusive.

It's very difficult to make up an identity in this day and age. Sure you can have an alias. Of course, there'll be duplicates. But we're fortunate as law enforcement professionals to've come into this after the Space Force's regulation of the

SoNet. These types of murders would've run rampant had you been able to regularly supply false information. It all but eliminated spam, allowed us a means to better pinpoint fraud, and ultimately kept the networking crowd safe. Those authenticity laws are what make it only a matter of time before Retsepar is caught."

"Pete, you said something last night about one of the other tenants, so could that be how Retsepar assumes additional identities in order to be able to sign up for these sites?" Julian deduced after accepting the slate computer from Yori. "He certainly can't use his own name. Even Stalkord distanced himself from this guy."

"If that's the case," Pete surmised, "then we've also gotta cross-reference random murders and missing persons reports. It's almost like being back at square one again. On top of this, if he's using identities from Earth, it'll be nearly impossible to pinpoint the fu--er."

With a sigh, Yori turned back around to his computer screen.

Julian promised while paging through the slate computer's contents, "Yori, we'll get you all the data you can crunch from these SoNet companies. We've got to get somebody on this. We need to also follow up on that tenant angle - set up some sort of surveillance."

Pete agreed, "Lightning only seems to strike twice with Retsepar."

"On that subject - man," Julian looked nervously down at the floor before regaining eye contact with Pete for an uneasy request, "have you put any further thought into Stalkord saying we should be focusing our efforts on the person who actually hired Retsepar, in the first place, to take you out?"

In Stalkord's Death Corps, there was no room for two things:

Space Force contracts and hitting the wrong target. Retsepar had fallen into the latter category and wound up becoming the first mercenary ever dismissed because of it. Now mistakes did happen and were all a part of the job, but taking additional pleasures in the flesh from the heinous power trip of rape went way overboard.

It was like Retsepar was so unstable he was not even trying to hit Pete - instead choosing to veer disturbingly off course. Those subsequent actions involved with killing Pete's wife and not Pete disgraced the guild of mercenaries and brought on a lot of undue heat and scrutiny which made their services less and less favorable to solicit. With clients balking at the chance to work with Death Corps, a statement needed to be made, so the mercenary turned serial killer was made an example of via firing by press conference. Moneys were refunded and another attempt was never made on the rugged cop's life, but the question still remained as to who, like Julian had put it, initiated the contract in the first place.

"That's probably an even longer list than what you have in your hand," Pete quipped.

The Lenorox Household

It was entirely too early for the phone to be ringing, but for as beautiful as Sylvia was in her slumber, she was still extremely groggy and went fumbling around and about across the night table for the phone. The voice mail had started to pick up, but once the handset was secured from its base, a moment was taken for her to blink away watery eyes before answering, "Hello?"

"Sylvia?" Billy said from the other end.

"It took you a whole twelve hours to call," Sylvia expressed disappointment as she sat up. "I was starting to think you didn't like me."

Billy's smile could be heard over the phone, "Nah I just didn't want you to think I was being too forward - desperate."

Clanging and other sounds like crashes were driving Sylvia uneasily back to consciousness, so she had to ask, "What's all that noise on your end?"

"I'm at the gym," Billy admitted, "knocking out my morning workout."

"Ah," Sylvia cooed, "and you were thinking about me?"

Billy cut to the chase although it sure seemed like the chase was all but over, "So what's up? You wanna do the cliché dinner and a movie or what?"

Sylvia was open to that, but it was all about details at this point, so she replied, "Yes. Well I'm working your event tonight, so I won't be able to get off my shift until after ten o'clock."

"Actually," Billy said, "that's fine. All my matches are going to be during the main event time slot for the tournament from here on out. I don't expect the next match to go very long, so I'll be getting out of there at about the same time as you."

"I have to ditch my partner though. Where do you plan on meeting up?" Sylvia inquired.

Billy suggested, "That'll work out perfectly. I've been making use of public transportation while I'm out here competing, so do you mind picking me up at my hotel? It'll give me a chance to get all slutted-up for you."

Sylvia burst out laughing, "We can do that. Consider it a

date, but I don't date losers, so you better keep your focus on the tournament until then."

"You know it," Billy realized, "and I'll use that as motivation."

"I didn't say kill your opponent, Billy," Sylvia clarified.

Billy cackled, "No I know. Probably wouldn't impress you all that much - probably scare you off actually. I won't get cocky."

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