

Previously on The Enforcers....

Episode 01

"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?"

Episode 02

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."

Episode 03

"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.

Episode 04

That sounded interesting, so Julian probed further about the bottom line, "Meaning what exactly?"

"Yourselves," Commissioner Gyro explained, "and select, other Police Force officers have been given the jurisdictional authorization of the Space Force for the purposes of protecting Leader One. You're no longer bound by Police Force protocols as far as authorizations and justifications are concerned. The others of your comrades were hand-selected by me and given similar powers

upon my recommendation so as to not have them be subjected to the same trial of death you both had to endure."

Episode 05

"You're starting to catch feelings for me already?" Billy said from beneath a barbell that appeared to have a pair of brutally heavy weights on it as he lay on top a bench working out his pectorals.

"I wanted to sincerely apologize for the way our date turned out," Sylvia said while overlooking Billy from the spotter position.

With a couple more presses and zero shakiness, Billy angled the intimidating bar over the lipped, reinforced holder. Not even winded, he sat up, turned around, and announced, "It was actually the best date I've had in ages."

Astonished, Sylvia shrugged, "Really?"

"Seriously," Billy reassured, "I belong to the Djibouti Clan. That's kinda my sick and twisted idea of a good time, so no hard feelings okay? To prove it to you, would you mind meeting my family tonight?

They'll be in attendance for my match. I already told them all about you."

"I'd be honored to try and earn their approvals," Sylvia smiled.

Episode 06

A chunk from the back of the office manager's head was displaced by the larger-sized bullet sniper rifles utilized. This sent blood spewing violently outward - soaking Pete as she twirled helplessly into his arms and coating the conference room walls, furniture, and floor. The initial spurt had actually reached the ceiling, and that sent the previous hostages into a frenzy. With no time to think, the rugged cop cradled the woman as he dropped to the floor for cover. The Police Force officers on the ground would need to be his eyes.

Pete beamed a promise from his eyes to eternally comfort the office manager before he closed hers. Afterward the rugged cop fingered his Ear-To-Mouth Com for some demanded answers, "Who fired the shot? And how?"

Episode 07

"Even you have to admit this sounds shady," Nayra suggested while wafting his hand from the Commissioner's seated position to Sylvia's. "Let's run through the part about Billy Smith's family," he urged while placing photographs of screen caps on the table, "Johnny Smith, Charlene Eriksen-Smith, and Erica Smith. They helped you fend off the Shokan and protect the camera crew?"

Sylvia nodded dejectedly in the affirmative. Had she not seen everything with her own two eyes, this would not have made an inkling of sense to her either.

All over that one, Nayra pressed, "With no training, no

weapons, and no chance - they just managed to fight off these Shokan? Come on Police Force Officer Lenorox. Admit the truth! None of this adds up. Was it the Palatine Triad who turned you?"

Episode 08

Luckily frontal and side airbags took care of Sylvia, her car did not flip over from the passenger side impact, and its sturdy construction kept it from shredding - only buckling under the aptly engineered crumple zones. Billy, however, needed to take to the air in order to survive this and did so with a vengeance as the Shokan who had been out of position in attacking him (to begin with) was thrown from the car and still on his mind. The Djibouti Clan student pushed high off the vehicle in the opposite direction of the collision and curled into the fetal position as he completed a forward one hundred eighty degree somersault catching the adversary in midair and ringing the assailant's neck before spiraling, himself, in the same motion (just used to snap the neck) to the ground.

The Shokan was going to die in any one of three ways: The impact of the landing (resulting from a car crash) would have been the first. If the adversary had somehow managed to survive that, then the sliding of Sylvia's car or one of the panicking vehicles from the oncoming traffic would have struck the assailant as the second. But Billy was no longer content with leaving the matter to chance and chose to end this match before either of them even hit the ground to make sure it was done.

Episode 09

It was something Commissioner Gyro could not take the total credit for as it was his skills of deductive reasoning that should have been credited, "No I've never met him, but I do know of the Master Dyoogie legacy. The Space Force happens to employ one third of it, Acro was the second third, and the final third resides back on Earth at the Djibouti Clan Dojo in Buffalo Grove - a city where I once used to work. What did the ninja end up asking of you?"

"Acro needed me to put together a group of specialists we wound up calling Enforcers. I wasn't the first ranking Space Force official to be attacked I'm sure, and I know I wasn't about to be the last. He requested I create a channel that ran up to me but was ultimately independent from the Space Force. His reasoning behind this centered around the tainting at the upper levels of our hierarchy, and his proof was the four bodies lying in my front yard.

Episode 10

With a widening swing of the door, Nayra allowed the unnamed associate to enter the room ahead of him. Once both were inside, he closed the door and began, "See I'm not all bad, Rogue. I realized your unit was down one official member due to suspension and three members in total if you count the Space Force operatives, so I'm extending the services of one my own most highly recommended

and decorated officers.

I'd like everybody to meet Detective Slubbich. He's served tours on Earth as well as most recently out in Explorigvasun as a part of a goodwill tour of Space Force-allied planets our government is looking to strike up further diplomatic relations with. His record of service made him the ideal candidate and a model officer for all to heed while he was an emissary of the Space Force. He'll do well around here if some of that influence can rub off on the likes of this so-called Police Force."

"Wait a minute," Julian turned around to face Nayra and the newest member of the Police Force with a scrunched up face of either astonishment or confusion and offered, "'By the eBook' Slubbich?"

"'By the eBook'," Slubbich accepted proudly and answered confidently.

Julian sighed while shaking his head, "Shi-."

Episode 11

"You will accept the succession of the Shokan leadership position," Sanjuana obstinately ordered, "or you'll die today."

"Wrong on both accounts," Billy stated as he blindsided Sanjuana with a right cross that sent his opponent twirling to the ground! "There are only three people in this universe who can beat me, and even that won't hold up too much longer, but unfortunately you're not one of them."

Episode 12

Stalkord offered no resistance as he was hauled up from the desk with his wrists fusion cuffed behind his back and led away, "You two really need to learn who your true adversaries actually are."

"Yeah well," Pete dismissed the notion, "why not educate us down at the Police Force Base."

The investor video conference feed hung eerily on the visual of Stalkord's vacant desk before going completely blank. No explanation was offered, and none was given.

And Now, The Continuation

First Edition, August 2014

The Enforcers: Freedom to Wield Will

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To live in the now ensures the past never gets in the way and the future has less of a say.

-Head Doctor Karyn Jacob
Atro City Hospital/The Enforcers

Disengaging from an active detective role and stepping in to try and fill some big shoes of the commissioner role is quite sobering. I haven't taken a single sip of alcohol since taking over what amounts to be a support position. All the Police Force may now depend on me, but my transition to leadership was met with nothing but their unyielding support.

-Acting Commissioner Pete Rogue
Second Earth Special Police Force

Antecedent leadership is no different than inconvenient leadership.

-Chipshot
The Enforcers

People get too hung up on the shallow understanding that comes from supposedly being able to comprehend what is directly in front of their face. I've not only traversed but survived two universes, and I still haven't seen everything there is to see, so there's always a possibility of my being wrong. Believing I'm always right will never be the cause of it though.

-Acro
The Enforcers

For
The Fans.

13: A Mother's Love

Convenience store air always seemed to be cooler, Vim Cobolgo thought. He entered behind Slubbich and followed closely as it appeared his new partner had the layout of the place already scoped out.

"The best Police Force officers always break off into a method of routine," Slubbich announced. "As you can imagine, its precursor coincides nicely with doing things by the eBook - actually gets you in that right frame of mind." He headed toward the back of the store and made his first stop at the coffee machines.

"Too bad I don't do coffee," Vim sighed. His partner, on the other hand, was fun to watch as it appeared Slubbich took an extra amount of pride in each and every hand motion used to retrieve a cup from the stack residing in the spring-loaded holder, fill the cup to within a centimeter of its rim with the decaffeinated variety, add the perfect amount of two measured drips from the vanilla-flavored cream sweetener, stir briskly with what normally would have been an awkward left hand, and secure the disposable cap on top the creation in such a manner the steam could seep while the scalding liquid did not spill.

With his life-sustaining elixir in hand, Slubbich turned around and started to walk off slowly while explaining, "See I catch a lot of flack for my 'By the eBook' stance, but people don't even realize how many options the eBook actually affords you. If I can't offer you a cup of coffee, can I offer you a bottled water? It doesn't matter what your routine is as long as you have one."

Vim nodded his understanding, "I'll take you up on that."

"Excellent," Slubbich acknowledged. "The coolers are over in this corner. It's normally the exact same product selection, but for some reason, the items up front are a little more expensive. I guess they don't figure the impulse buyers running in for a quick item or two will notice the disparity, so that's another reason flying by the seat of your pants isn't necessarily the best tact for work or life."

"Because things are rarely as they appear at first glance?" Vim questioned for further clarification.

"Excuse us," MC said as he and Cindra Rondy made their way around a tight corner and brushed unknowingly (of the occasion) up against Slubbich and Vim's personal space.

Politely Slubbich replied, "No problem," before he continued his conversation with Vim on over to the corner housing the larger coolers, "and that's what I mean. You never know who is whom. You never know which is what. This is until you take the time to figure it out."

"Were those friends of yours?" Cindra inquired as she put a few different bags of chips crowding her grasp onto the checkout counter.

MC had a couple packs of soft drinks burdening him, so Cindra promptly moved aside to give him an angle to hoist his groceries up onto the counter next to hers. "No but I recognize them, and you should too."

Cindra smiled as she dug inside her purse for her debit card, "Oh I do."

The Second Earth Special Police Force Base

The interrogation room was unusually small. There was no two-way glass, and it was doubtful the room was even monitored because this was usually the point where the phone eBook came out. In many precincts, throwing the eBook at somebody was something done literally for the purposes of coercing a confession out a suspect whether truthful or not. Rooms like these kept the participants from being disturbed by such things as legal counsel and due process.

Stalkord was not some petty criminal who would be phased by a scene like this or goaded into incriminating himself with a slip of his tongue at the behest of the shady tactics about to be employed by the crafty Police Force officers standing before him. He had been around and actually authored legal arrangements between his company, Ennead Tech Corp - of which he was the chief executive officer, and humongous multi-universal factions like the Space Force and New Alliance. If Pete Rogue and Julian Kazar wanted to make this into a physical altercation - well, fatally pertinent reasons existed as to why he had also been the top mercenary as the leader of Death Corps back on Earth.

In fact, none of this concerned Stalkord. He had not yet contacted his attorney and practically would not lose any sleep over the somewhat embarrassing situation where Pete and Julian had snatched him out his corporate offices from off his investor call. It provided a fun and interesting challenge for trying to explain that occurrence away and somehow turn the indescribable incident into profitability.

As Stalkord laid his tie on the tabletop and unbuttoned the

top buttons of his buttoned-down shirt, he waited patiently for this to begin. Honestly this was too long overdue. The three of them needed to clear the air, get some things off their chests, and attempt to put this constant animosity behind them. With it between them, a broken record played out on repeat - the sound of which was seriously becoming old. He had many enemies, but never before had his enemies been so far off base. This was shocking. Pete and Julian were going to get themselves killed by pursuing the paths they happened to be on irrespective of the vision they needed in order to traverse such a treacherous terrain. And what happened to be most ironic was the fact their deaths would not even come by his hands or anybody associated with him. See that was the scary part he needed to rectify immediately, and he chose to do so by dropping his guard if only momentarily.

Another benefit of this room was the ability for Pete to smoke indoors. He and Julian were breaking all types of other rules, so the public smoking ban did not have much of a chance at holding up either. After lighting up, he sat on the edge of the table and offered one to Stalkord - a last cigarette of sorts.

"You're funny," Stalkord was amused by the sentiment.

"How is this supposed to go down, Stalkord?" Julian sat at the other end of the table but was not laughing as he removed his LUNC and slammed it on the tabletop.

"What's the connection between you, Needo Palatine, and Lil Tiny Palatine?" Pete layered his questioning on top of Julian's. "Are you the third head of the Palatine Triad?"

Stalkord admitted, "In another universe, maybe. Needo is a competent employee who happens to be related to Lil Tiny. He wished to make the jump from organized crime to -"

Julian interrupted, "White collar crime?"

"Call it what you want," Stalkord conceded in order to move the conversation along, "but he was the most qualified individual for the position, and I'll make my notes on the interviewing process available to you -"

Pete interrupted Stalkord now, "As for the Palatine Triad?"

Getting a little annoyed with being readily interrupted, Stalkord emphasized the first part to his reply, "As for - the Palatine Triad, they also serve their purpose."

"Which is?" Julian tersely questioned.

"Which is," Stalkord stated, "doing your job for you."

"How so?" Pete inquired skeptically.

Looking away to his side for a moment, Stalkord decided to backtrack, "Let me give you a quick lesson on power, who has it, and who pretends. Factions are the most powerful entities in this universe: The Space Force, New Alliance, Pillorian Regime, Doran Aristocracy, Doran Military, Ronds, Slogrs, Rylaea. You want to act like I pull strings; they pull strings. The reason I am not and will never be afraid of you is because I've had to deal with these factions. The reason I do not and will not take you seriously is because you're incapable of seeing them for who they really are with this blinding hatred you hold toward me."

Shifting slightly to stand up and then approach, lean, and hover over Stalkord, Pete suggested, "You're going to get to your point soon, I hope?"

"That's exactly my point," Stalkord claimed. "I had to call in the Palatine Triad to take out Staines Warehouse District with the Space Force weapons Ennead Tech Corp was supposed to be disposing of because you're too busy chasing after your own tail you perceive to be me."

After rubbing his mouth with a pensive left hand, Julian

placed that hand on the table, sat up, and asked, "Why?"

With a sigh, Stalkord announced, "Drugs. Stanislaw Krell is about to introduce something so addictive into the population of Second Earth we haven't seen since long ago back on Earth, and he all but has the Space Force's blessing to do so as they engage in this halfhearted attempt at trying to partner with the Rylaea for the purposes of stopping this at the source."

"What?" Pete backed off slightly. "Who is this Stanislaw Krell?"

"It's nice to see you're not naive enough to believe the Space Force is innocent of my levied charges," Stalkord acknowledged, "but I'll get you my information on Krell. He's the least of our concerns though."

"Yeah," Julian concurred as he sat forward, "because if what you said is true, then you just crossed the Space Force."

It was interesting how that little point seemed to resonate with Pete and Julian. Stalkord was finally beginning to get through to them. Perhaps it was the disassociation of himself with being the biggest fish in a small universe, or maybe it was his new tact of being forthcoming with some seriously da-ning information which could have him thrown under the jail - not too far from this room actually. At minimum, the little bit of information he had volunteered to this point could see him ruined or killed. He continued, "It's because the Space Force crossed me first. Remember the office manager incident?"

Pete sighed, "How could I forget? I had her brains splashed all over me by a sniper."

"Yes well the sniper was the Space Force's doing," Stalkord accused, "and the office manager's behavior was the result of the New Alliance crossing me."

It's a long story, but let's focus in on the Space Force and how heavy-handed they're becoming since that is of the most relevance to what you now have to deal with. Because let's face it, you don't have a huge corporation like Ennead Tech Corp backing you up. You don't have mercenaries on your payroll who can extend your freedom to wield will. And you don't have underworld connections for when you simply just want to make a statement to your enemies. Fortunately you do have at least one faction in your corner as well as other people, including myself, who are pulling for you."

Faction? Julian found that to be peculiar and shrugged, "Which faction?"

This elicited a laugh from Stalkord, "Like I told you before when you so rudely whisked me away from my investor call, you two really need to learn who your true adversaries actually are. But what's worse is the idea you don't even have any clue about who your true allies are. If you want to know more about that faction, then ask Sylvia."

"But she -" Julian started to say.

"I know what she did," Stalkord was the one doing the interrupting now in order to keep the flow of the discussion on pace with the cadence he believed was most conducive for Pete and Julian's receptiveness, "but you'll soon understand what it was she'd done.

The Space Force wants Second Earth to be subservient, docile, and at odds with itself so it cannot be at odds with them. Something big is about to go down, and those who are smart enough to figure it out are being targeted. Those who are strong enough to try and stop it are being taken out.

But don't take my word for all this." He reached inside his

suit coat, pulled out an Ear-To-Mouth Com, and placed it on the table. This next feature was his favorite from the device his company created, so he tapped one of its buttons to reveal a holographic image of Commissioner Gyro who had a prerecorded message:

"Pete, Julian - if you're viewing this recording, then I am a little disappointed you overstepped your bounds in once again accosting Stalkord, but now is the time we must move forward on all matters.

You know I'm sincerely sorry for the loss of your wife, so when I say this, I don't make the request lightly: This beef between yourselves and Stalkord needs to end today. Death Corps was as infiltrated with spies as the Second Earth Special Police Force. Stalkord would've given you the information you'd demanded long ago if it was within his power to do so, but Retsepar didn't turn out to be core Death Corps. He was more of a plant meaning his sole purpose was to create a distraction that'd take your most hated enemy's focus off where it needed to be because of the constant harassment stemming from your incessant investigative activities against him," the Commissioner explained.

Pete nor Julian had ever considered an angle like this. Stalkord had always seemed like the roadblock, but Commissioner Gyro's deduction held a high level of validity in their eyes. The message was also authentic because Ear-To-Mouth Coms could only be tuned to the wearer as a security precaution against spoofing. This was like a personal voice mail. The fact the device was not with their former leader and in the hands of who they perceived to be one of their greatest foes meant the cognitive dissonance had all but been broken up among them. The only thing they could do was remain silent and listen intently as the recording continued.

The Commissioner said, "Yori Curch is the Space Force plant in your midst, and there's no telling what information (we'd all spoken about in confidence) has been disseminated to them through him. If you want to know who to trust, I'd say to keep it between yourselves, Slubbich - he is a good man, Vim, Sec, and Sylvia.

Yes, Sylvia. I figured Yori out but neglected to realize the larger implication of what my deductive reasoning held in store for me. The moment I let out the fact I knew and he knew I knew, the Space Force also knew. From there, I went from being someone they could manipulate to somebody they needed to watch. I signed my own death warrant on that final day. The Space Force sealed it for sure. And I'm not waiting around for it to be delivered.

There's a betrayal within that story I'll need to address, but it doesn't belong to Yori. Back to Sylvia though, she played a card giving me a reason to not have to be around. It was so well-played - even I didn't recognize it initially, and although the Space Force might not have seen it either, my discharge gave me the chance I needed to escape their view before they picked up on the scent of the actual deception.

Thanks to Stalkord's logistics channels, I've slipped my way through the Space Force's severing of communications with the Terran System and am headed to Earth. Apparently I'm one of two people entrusted with the information about a splinter group called the Enforcers. They exist beneath the Space Force but above the Police Force. But the way this was pitched to me was fraught with lies and half-truths.

I was told these Enforcers were a group independent of the Space Force and would be used to keep the Space Force in check from individuals within the Space Force who'd want to do it harm. I later realized the Enforcers were a group sanctioned by the Space

Force and would be used to keep the Space Force in power against upstarts like Ennead Tech Corp, other factions, or individuals who'd question them. Governments have been doing this forever, and I believe sometimes we become a little ideological whenever someone steps up and says they're above certain types of behavior and tactics that've plagued societies since the fallacy of order was conceived. Philosophical debates aside, our reality is you're going to have your hands full in protecting Second Earth, and this is only the part I know about.

I'd like to get the other person's take on this, and it's almost assured I'll be expected to make this move - otherwise I wouldn't have been told the little tidbit about a potential ally. The Space Force will want me out the way, but first they'll have to contend with my network in doing their worst, so I'm not concerned about myself per se. In order for them to get to me, they will make a beeline for me through Edith."

"Shi-," Pete muttered.

"I couldn't take her, Ardina, and Devore into this," Commissioner Gyro pleaded, "but they aren't exactly safe with me around in their lives either. I need you to watch my family. There was no way I could leave on a family trip - not to Earth obviously, and certainly not with the date of my impending deposition looming over my head. Normally I wouldn't be considered a flight risk, so there's a little bit of time for me to do my work and get back. If the Space Force gets - when they get suspicious, this can become messy.

But I know you'll do your best. My friends, we will meet again. Take care of yourselves, and take care of each other."

As the Commissioner's holographic image dissipated, Julian stood up and took the Ear-To-Mouth Com in hand. It was almost like

the feeling of clutching an heirloom from a lost loved one, but there was no time to become overly sentimental, so he looked upon Stalkord not necessarily in a new light but a different light and wondered, "What's in it for you? You're at the forefront of everything. It seems like everybody is pulling some sort of strings, but it all boils down to a handful of puppet masters. Everyone else is just on a string."

Working to meet eye contact with both Pete and Julian, Stalkord answered, "It didn't use to be like that - all this treachery. I've seen more honorable times when a day's work paid a decent wage, you could hold your head high, and you weren't taken for granted by or trying to get over on your company.

I long for those days again. Right now, it's like the universe is trying to kill itself but is so screwed and twisted up it probably couldn't even figure out how to do that correctly."

About the only thing more astonishing than the fact Slubbich just used turn signals while backing his car out its space in the store parking lot was the fact he was actually driving five miles per hour as per the various signs that posted the speed limits. It was unclear as to whether or not his jovial mood was in response to the feeling he felt when following the rules or the thought of digging into the spread of doughnuts they were eventually bringing back to the Police Force Base. There would be one more stop along the way.

"Dude, we just got passed by somebody who was pushing a shopping cart!" Vim watched this display of good driving from beneath the embarrassment of his left hand shielding his face as he

scooched down into the seat in an attempt to further conceal his identity.

"It's just as easy to go slow as it is to go fast," Slubbich countered.

Vim disagreed, "Not according to Julian. Hey what if the eBook is wrong?"

Slubbich asked for clarification almost as if he had never heard this question before, "How do you mean, wrong?"

"Well," Vim explained, "there have been times when the written laws were incorrect and did a great disservice to entire populations of people. In the time it took to overturn such unforgivable mistakes in the legal system and an overall falter in society, in general, so many were harmed irreparably. At that point, would it have been appropriate to circumvent or even break those laws to bring about equality in the rules?"

"Nice question," Slubbich admitted. "The leveling of a playing field becomes the difference between the exercise of good versus poor societal law, but I won't duck out on your query. If I were in the position, I'd still do things by the eBook."

Shaking his head in clear admonishment, Vim could not believe his ears and made his discontent known with his mouth, "Come on, Slubbich - you'd enforce something as horrible as slavery?"

Rather than trying to save any sort of politically correct face, Slubbich instead chose to speak from the standpoint of an unequivocal truth, "The eBook is never wrong, however those who write or interpret its laws may be. The scenario you outlined offers a license for anarchy, and I guarantee the anarchists will turn around and be no different if not worse in their tactics than those they perceive to be their oppressors. These oppressors may

very well be in the wrong, but lashing out like militants, insurgents, and terrorists will never end the cycle - only prolong and exacerbate it. Oppression needs to end in the law, and again the law must apply to everybody equally."

"Then how does one go about leveling the playing field in the scenario you outlined?" Vim wondered.

"Fortunately I believe all things are possible when we do things by the eBook," Slubbich replied, "but between you and me, let's hope we never have to find out."

Weeding out the remainder of the converted Shokan had become a bit of a morning ritual in itself for Acro and Acra Lin - a sparring exercise of sorts. With the Shokan's dojo crushed, they had their enemy on the run and took to the chase with a cool head for the hunt in seeking a thoroughness of effort.

The Shokan had grown organically throughout the universe with a training program that lured many unsuspecting fighters into their ranks, but they had help. Their presence was just too thick on Second Earth, and these skirmishes were testing more of Acro and Acra Lin's patience than their Dyoogie Discipline skills.

For Acro and Acra Lin to be carrying this battle on during the broad daylight of morning hours meant they were closing in on the origination of the influx they voraciously sought. And in this game, there was no use putting off until the night what could be done at day to prevent the Shokan from repositioning and ultimately regrouping.

Acro and Acra Lin were going to stay on the Shokan until this was done and the Djibouti Clan's rival nuisance was

neutralized for all time. Their Class V Fighters skimmed the blue sky just above a busy highway suffering from a bout of rush hour traffic.

Immediately Acro spotted a convoy below and began to open up with an indiscriminate laser barrage that chose not to waste any shots with warnings. As for the innocent bystanders - well, the morning commuters would best be served by moving out the way or risk getting taken out.

"Three vans," Acra Lin said into her Ear-To-Mouth Com, "and one car in the lead. How much do you want to bet the vans are the decoy and the car will take us to where we want to go?"

"I would put some good money on that bet," Acro stated, "but I'd rather put my fighter down on the first van." He gripped the twin yokes resolutely and brought his ship in just behind the van running trailer.

The doors to this van swung open, nearly closed back when they bounced against any give allowed by their hinges, and reacted to the high speeds working against any aerodynamics on the boxy vehicle's part. Shokan rushed to the edge of the van with laser rifles firing in the direction of Acro's fighter. And no sooner shot were the laser pulses deflected by the ship's Repulser Shielding in every direction except the intended.

Impervious to the attacks of the Shokan, Acro still needed to be concerned with the other traffic as his fighter streaked down the highway in a level pursuit of the convoy. Colliding with any of the other traffic out this morning would be more trouble than it was worth, so he held his fighter steady while swerving in and out of it with the ease of what a much more nimble land-based vehicle could do. This was all a part of the ploy because Acra Lin had not yet divulged her presence, and she hoped to keep her covertness

intact until the lead car stopped at its destination.

A barrel roll through some of the tightening traffic that was going to run this chase into a bumper-to-bumper slowdown freed Acro up to get a lock on the van he had been hounding. The ninja launched a missile into the rear of the vehicle exploding the front while blowing the laser rifle-toting Shokan out the back. If the early morning commuters did not take the carnage of the burning vehicle or the bodies that had flown from it into the path of other vehicles testing out their braking distance as a sign pulling over might be smart, then they would never understand the emergency of this situation.

With the traffic from the rear having been frozen into a stall that would probably add a half hour to the commute, Acro turned his attention to the second van. Learning from the mistakes of their decimated comrades, there was no attempt to try and shoot things out with his fighter. The intent of their taking to the interior shoulder of the highway was to run, and they must have figured he was giving second thoughts to the other commuters who had nothing to do with this in their attempt to use those other vehicles to shield them off from the ship.

This was obviously not the case, but to be fair, it was lingering in the back of Acro's mind, so he attempted to minimize the collateral damage by making use of his fighter's unmatched speed and flying off on ahead of the second van. Even if that vehicle could cross over from the median strip and head the other direction, it would still need to slow down in order to do so. Therefore the highway was a one-way trap his ship's directional privilege could exploit aerially.

Stabilizing into a hovering state directly over the median strip but about sixty yards out, Acro turned on target of the

oncoming van and let loose a barrage of laser fire eating up the pavement (ahead of the vehicle) it eventually ran into and wound up losing control from as there was no place to turn and not enough time to stop.

The van's tires shredded against the jagged ruts in the ground, so the vehicle flung itself into the concrete median before veering uncontrollably back the other way and into the traffic of the fast lane. It was chaos, yet Acro did not stop there as he turned his fighter in order to take up pursuit of the third van but loosed a rearward missile into the second one before he proceeded to do so. No bodies flew away this time (although they might have wanted to) as the concussive blast sent the wreckage tumbling over and across tailgaters who had been following too closely until flames boomed outward in a concentric circle charring the highway and further compromising its structural integrity as the intensity either melted or cracked the pavement under the cataclysmic strain.

People rarely ever saw car accidents as they occurred, and those who did were normally too busy thanking their lucky stars for the lack of involvement to have enough of a clear recollection to all the details surrounding the occurrence. It was either the culture of the times or the times of the culture that kept Acro from having to worry about the future implications of flying a fighter along a busy highway and taking out two vans in a violent fashion and plain sight. In the end, could a person really be one hundred percent sure of what was just seen, or would their impression of the past events be believed in the slightest? If not, to either of those points, then things probably did not occur in the way the people who had seen the carnage envisioned it to happen, and the occurrence could be chalked up to being another fluke of the dreaded morning commute.

For one, Acro certainly was not going to pay this anymore mind, and anybody wishing to make something of his tactics was well within their rights to try and find him. The Enforcers, and himself in particular, were so far off the grid of existence their parents probably happened to be unaware they even had these children. The shadows were good friends to them, and ironically a shadow showed up most distinctly during the day.

The final van and the lead car were wising up and had made their way over to the nearest exit for the purposes of taking this to the tightening spaces of a subdivision. Stealthily from above, Acra Lin still continued to track them, and it was not long before Acro's fighter streaked into her monitor's visual as he made his ship zoom along the winding exit ramp before skirting up underneath the overpass - thundering after the fleeing vehicles.

Running a stop sign, the lead car turned down a different path than the final van that had chosen to attempt a running stop in slight yet ignored hesitation of the oncoming traffic beginning to fill the intersection. This momentary pause gave Acro an unrequired opportunity he did not need but would surely take advantage of in order to catch up to the vehicle.

The Shokan in the back of the van heard what amounted to be the thump of two feet landing atop the roof and a forward roll toward the front of the vehicle probably used to gain some semblance of balance. Uneasily they clutched at their laser rifles. Out the front window, the Class V Fighter could be seen hovering before them until it took off for higher skies as an obedient drone ship.

Rapid fire LUNC pulses from above the driver and passenger side seats put the driver and passenger riding shotgun down

permanently as their seat belts held their limp, perforated bodies in place while the van rolled out of control across four lanes of traffic! Additional pulses went through the windshield before a pair of boots came crashing down inside followed by the rest of Acro's body. Upon entering the vehicle, he grabbed hold of the steering wheel and swerved them back on the straight and narrow in stride of pushing to the back in order to deal with the remaining Shokan. Four stood in contention.

Taking immediate aim with his LUNC, Acro fired a high percentage shot to the face of the Shokan in the foreground and on his left. The person collapsed to the floor of the van as not much else could be done in said instance, but it did not dissuade the other three from attacking. He welcomed the laser rifle pulses by shirking those attempts in the direction of the downed Shokan before snapping off a close-quartered jump kick to the Shokan standing in the background on his right.

Now in the center of the melee, Acro pushed to lock up with the Shokan on his right in the foreground. He knocked the enemy's laser rifle aside as the weapon was pretty much useless during such a struggle and then drove into his opponent by utilizing the flailing gun arm to fling the person into the errant laser rifle pulses that had just been loosed by the Shokan on his left in the background. Two remained.

No make that one. The Shokan who had been stunned initially with a jump kick to the sternum now lay with a fatality of LUNC pulses peppering the person during unconsciousness and pressuring the person's soul into the death slumber of lifelessness. The final Shokan brushed the body of the second Shokan off before staggering to a futile position which, at this point, was anyplace throughout the van Acro could reach.

The Enforcer burst out the rear of the van and latched onto its roof where he hauled himself back up and on top as his fighter swooped down. His long, flowing Crimson Red Belt (worn as a headband rather than around the waist) flew like a flag along with the high speed of travel. The final Shokan fell effortlessly from the moving vehicle with a snapped neck, and the person's body scraped across the street until it came to a shredded halt in the middle of the road.

The van wound up slamming into a building just after Acro pulled away in his fighter. Immediately he sought to catch his bearings by asking a locational query via the Ear-To-Mouth Com, "What's my position in accordance of the lead car?"

Acra Lin replied from high above, "They've gotten away - safely distant just as we'd planned."

"Excellent," Acro acknowledged, "although I'd felt a familiar presence within that vehicle."

"You know he'll be challenging you soon," Acra Lin reminded.

Acro simply sighed.

"What's wrong, Billy?" Sylvia Lenorox asked as she looked over to see what amounted to be a paining expression on her man's face. They both sat in the back seat of the lead and now only car left remaining from the original convoy.

"It's Acro," Billy Smith turned to look at Sylvia as he

addressed his lady friend's question. "He was in the fighter hounding us. I could feel him."

"Is everybody alright back there?" Sanjuana Woody inquired from the shotgun passenger seat as he turned around gingerly to keep the added strain of his seat belt off his hyperextended and ultimately wrecked (for the time being) right arm.

The driver stayed rightly focused on the road forward during all the inquiries and wellness checks.

Billy sat up and leaned across the center of the car to speak to the driver when he ordered, "Stop here!"

Sylvia questioned, "What? Why?"

"Acro's too good," Billy responded. "The vans probably got taken out, but I know he's still tracking us from above somehow. We should split up and make our way to the rendezvous point on foot at the next spot of cover that can blind his eyes to the transfer."

Sanjuana was agreeable to this when he turned to the driver for the purposes of concurring with the merit of the order, "Let's do that then."

Sitting back, Billy awaited the moment when they would each need to flee the car and press forward on foot. He looked down to see Sylvia holding his left hand with hers.

"I really appreciate you taking the opportunity to hear my side of things out," Sylvia said.

With a subtle turn to once again look in Sylvia's direction, Billy responded, "You made me an offer I couldn't refuse - one I'm not quite sure why my surrogate family or master sheltered me from it."

Shrugging away the sentiment, Sylvia offered her view of the situation, "Well that's only because they knew how you'd react. My responsibility isn't to make you have to choose but to provide all

the information so, for the first time in your life, you can make a fully informed decision."

Perish the thought of anybody attempting to give Billy more control over his life. He still could not figure out Sylvia's angle in this. After all, she had been recently converted to a Doran physiology, but her demeanor was far from that of one of the converted New Alliance slaves he had always been warned about. Getting this much closer to the Shokan caused him to wonder about their numbers of converted members as well. Each still maintained a normal personality, although by the very nature of conversion, it was clear those personalities had been suitably altered for some purposes not entirely clear to him - even his lady friend, but she too was behaving differently than he would have expected.

"Thank you, Sylvia," Billy said while gripping her hand firmly in response.

Atro City Hospital

Grits, eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage, toast, and grapefruit juice. A fragrant awakening greeted Karyn Jacob as she raised her head up from the makeshift pillow of crossed arms on top the desk in her office.

"I've never seen you this tired before," Terry Terrison said as he laid a tray of delectable food on Karyn's desk.

"It's like I'm working two different jobs," she replied while rubbing her weary eyes and rubbing away her previously blurred vision. "I've never seen you this spry before."

Terry smiled as he handed Karyn a napkin while setting her

food items into a logical order in front of her, "How things have changed, it feels like the weight of the universe was recently lifted off my shoulders at least briefly."

Accepting the napkin graciously, Karyn said, "Thank you for this. Last night, I got so caught up in my work I neglected to offer you the keys to my place. Where did you even sleep?"

"I didn't want to disturb you, so I took a couch in the waiting area," Terry answered as he pointed toward the door to Karyn's office, "and it wasn't really that bad seeing as though my bed of late had been either one of the benches in the shuttle I arrived in."

"Are you serious?" Karyn asked rhetorically. "Well neither of those were my bed."

After locating a freestanding chair, Terry pulled it up beside Karyn's desk. He sat down and hinted at a plausible future, "There's still time for that. Get your strength up. What is keeping you so busy anyway? Patients or administrative work?"

Karyn dug into the toast first before answering, "It's actually a little bit of both. Health care is a big deal on Second Earth because the inhabitants can afford to demand the best which is interesting, but I'm seeing a lot more preventive screenings, so that's very encouraging. The life of a head doctor, and you've been there. You know how it is."

"That I do," Terry concurred. He waved off an offer for some of Karyn's food. It was more than she could hope to finish, and the subtle dangling of her hand over the sizable portions placed throughout the tray was meant to be polite. "It's nice to be on vacation though. I was doing science/medical and engineering at the same time for a while. It was rough for a minute, but we acquired some special, new talent who could free my services up

some. And with this free time, I chose to visit the love of my life."

"I missed you," Karyn admitted as she swirled her grits and eggs together for a moment with her fork, "and I was worried about you. It'd be a lot easier if you were assigned to a single post, but you're a jack of many trades who wears various hats and seems to know a little bit about everything. There's no telling where you would've ended up or how you'd have fared once you arrived."

Without having to think about it, Terry promised, "Nothing in the universe can keep me away from you as long as you still want me."

The grapefruit juice was surprisingly fresh this morning - not at all like the commoditized concentrate from the hospital cafeteria's juice machines Karyn was expecting. A twinge of tartness caused her mouth to pucker from the welcome flavor actually mirroring the taste of a freshly squeezed grapefruit, and the pulp was included. She licked her lips clean of the intense liquid prior to looking up at Terry in his eyes and saying, "As long as you'll still have me, I'll be here for you."

A delicate conversation of innuendo was being carried on by both Terry and Karyn as they each tried to skate around secrets that could not be divulged to the other for fear of many relevant safety concerns. It was a barefoot dance across a bed of broken glass they had not necessarily made but had to lie in nonetheless. For him, his vacation was part of a new, dangerous assignment which would serve to keep tabs on powerful enemies from a distance - distanced from his original posting for the purposes of being able to react more proactively in the event his nontouted talents would be called upon. For her, these additional responsibilities of an added assignment were matters of planetary security, so the very

forthcoming nature of owning up to the position would be as deadly an outing to her as it would be to anybody she was close to. Although difficult, this one point made the decision simple in her mind. There were reasons Second Earth was the utopia the advertisements presented in its portrayal. There were reasons the Space Force made this their epicenter of operations - the home of its fleet and industry.

There were always reasons, so Terry and Karyn sincerely hoped this justification would not only be enough for the glossing over of their secretive behavior to continue but the weight against the consideration of those other alternatives would not snap back around to bite them. Unenviable positions did not necessarily net choice decisions, however unconditional love would have to take the place of understanding, and True Love would need to pick up the rest of the slack.

The Shokan Dojo

Nothing could cause a person to lose their appetite or turn a person's stomach like the sight of a slaughter. Slubbich and Vim made their way into the central sparring floor where the coroner was earning the salary of pay this day. The additional on duty Police Force officers otherwise stood around as there was not much else for them to do.

It was hard for Vim to believe his own eyes, and he said as much, "An army must have come through here like a buzz saw. The Shokan are some of the most powerful fighters in all the universe, and they were just dispatched. I don't even have the words to

describe this."

Noticeably quiet as he and Vim walked through rows of crumpled bodies, Slubbich did not allow the emotion of a detestable scene of destruction get to him, or if he did, he did not allow it to show as detective mode set in and his pensiveness reigned supreme. With each of the three towers having been destroyed, mounting numbers of bodies would need to be pulled out the rubble. Evidence would be tough to gather from the aftermath. It was not an overly bloody scene in some areas, but in others, bodies were shredded. The walk-through might not have been for added effect, but it caused him to become familiar with the crime scene as the lengths the perpetrator had gone or was willing to go were made clear. Intent was established.

"What does your eBook have to say about this?" Vim turned to Slubbich with what normally would have been a verbal snipe but actually turned out to be a verbally honest deference of respect in inquisitiveness.

Facing Vim, Slubbich pursed his lips uneasily before spitting out, "We need to get together a list of suspects and further investigate from there. Any evidence will be cataloged for our future review, so let's put our heads together back at the base. I'll say this though: These Shokan sure seem to be at the root of everything chaotic going on around here."

The Brael Moonbeam

Billy and Sylvia slipped underneath a ticketing gate attached to a booth near the ground level entrance to a parking

structure connected to an Ennead Tech Corp satellite office before hurrying inside. Filled with cars, this was (for all intents and purposes) a normal working day. Except their destination was not a new set of wheels but the elevator toward the back of the winding structure.

Sylvia led the entire way. Once inside the elevator, she circumvented the numbered buttons that would have led to any of the associated parking structure levels by placing the palm of her hand on the DNA Recognition/Authorization plate directly below the normal controls. The transport began to descend and its descent was nothing short of incredibly steep as the depth of the plummet fell miles beneath the perceptible surface.

With a shrug, Billy questioned, "What've we gotten ourselves into?"

"As long as we get ourselves out of it together," Sylvia answered, "I suppose it's all for the best."

The clear glass casing of the elevator pushed through a significant layer of second earth before entering a dug-out, second earthen hub with a three hundred fifty meter long ship set as its destination below.

"I don't recognize this type of vessel," Billy admitted.

Because of her recent conversion to a Doran physiology, Sylvia had all the explanation as she described, "It's from the Doran Aristocracy - a Peculiar Class vessel. Her name is the Brael Moonbeam. Thanks to our friends at Ennead Tech Corp, we were able to construct it under the Space Force's nose. That ship is the Aristocracy's answer to a spacestation - smaller but just about as, if not more, deadly."

The Brael Moonbeam was a regal-looking ship from the sight of its rounded thruster and wing sections. They appeared to be

more sculpted than assembled creating a design both elegant and powerful. The other piece to the ship was the cockpit section protruding nobly out the center. All in all, the Peculiar Class vessel looked like a well-formed 'W' with ellipsoid features.

There was a name Billy had not heard before, so his inquisitiveness continued, "Doran Aristocracy - what's that?"

"The good Dorans," Sylvia said simply. "They split off from the Doran Military - a subset of the New Alliance who I'm sure you've heard of."

"So you were converted to the Doran Aristocracy and not the New Alliance?" Billy probed because, if for nothing else, the answer would prove to give him some measure of comfort in its reassurance.

Sylvia answered in the affirmative, "As were the rest of the converted Shokan."

If this was true, another da-ning omission equaled one more thing Billy's surrogate family and Acro had not so simply forgotten to mention or left out purposely. He did not know or was not aware of any divisions within the Doran order - ethnocentric as it was to believe any group was all exactly the same in beliefs, actions, and temperament. But the credibility of his most trusted family and friends was waning by the moment. As fast as the elevator descended into an unloading platform within the Brael Moonbeam was his faith in the words of those (he would have given everything for) sinking. And nothing said fear like being unable to fully trust one's own immediate family - surrogate or otherwise.

Upon exiting the elevator, Billy and Sylvia were greeted by a couple U-Gun-toting Doran Aristocracy soldiers wearing their traditional crimson red battle garb, the ditched car's driver, Sanjuana, Glove who (at first glance) appeared to be ailing, and a

woman needing no introduction.

Storming out the elevator, Billy rushed to fall to his knees before the woman and immediately pressed his head up against her abdomen. There was no containing his joy as seen by the tears pouring from his eyes while he squeezed and held on tightly to his biological mother.

Sylvia was all smiles as she exited the elevator with an unmatched feeling of accomplishment in her own rite. Sanjuana nodded his approval of the scene. Even the somewhat emotionless driver had to offer a smile. When the former occupants of the elevator were deemed not to be a threat, the Aristocracy soldiers holstered their U-Guns and returned to their allotted posts at either side of the elevator's entrance.

Finally Glove had seen his family be reunited. He was pleased with the outcome and would eventually be forced to come to grips with the cost, but this one moment was worth every bit of the price he had yet to pay. To see Billy accept him for who he was as a father who went to any lengths to find his son seemed indescribable outside the outpour of emotions causing him to hug the mother of his previously lost child.

And of her, she had seen Billy stolen away from her after carrying him to term and having only held him briefly during the instant following his childbirth. An unforgivable sin was perpetrated against her family that she stopped at nothing of her own volition to put herself in a position to rectify and eventually avenge. Glove had helped in this endeavor and successfully reunited their child with his mother - a woman simply known by the name of Commander.

THE ENFORCERS: FREEDOM TO WIELD WILL

14: Judge, Jury, and Enforcer

The Second Earth Special Police Force Base

"You know this is one of the stereotypes about cops I don't really mind?" Julian explained as he entered the conference room and took a gander at the spread of doughnuts Slubbich had amassed.

"I don't think any of the four of us fit the typical mold," Pete admitted while trailing Julian into the conference room and immediately finding his seat at the head of its table.

Slubbich and Vim were already situated as they sat to Pete's left respectively. Julian raided one of the boxes of doughnuts for a jelly-filled kind before taking his seat on the rugged cop's right side. He apologized, "I'm sorry we're a little bit late."

"It gave Vim and I a chance to further review your report on the Staines Warehouse District investigation," Slubbich went right into things. He and punctuality were a bit of an item, but efficiency was a part of his inner circle as well.

"We've got about four ongoing investigations," Pete paused a moment to preface that statement, "as well as my personal fifth: The incident at Cipher Coliseum, Ennead office manager - I'm going to call it an assassination, Staines Warehouse District investigation, Shokan Dojo massacre, and Retsepar. All these are seemingly random events, but Julian and I are coming to realize everything is part of a larger narrative."

"How so?" Vim inquired.

Making sure to wipe his mouth with a napkin before he spoke, Julian stated, "On Second Earth, there really is only a short list

of players. The events are inextricably linked because even fewer are tasked with the ability to pull any strings. While we're saddled with trying to sort through the crazy happenings as of late, it's not like any of our suspects are going out their way to hide, deflect attention from themselves, or deny any wrongdoing."

With a nod, Slubbich concurred, "You're absolutely right. Every single one of these events has been boldly undertaken among the open scrutiny of broad daylight."

"It's like whoever's involved in all this mayhem is daring us to take them on so they can take us out," Julian said as he stood up and made his way over to the water cooler in the far corner of the conference room adjacent to the side with the door. Oddly nothing said filling to him like sugary foods and water. The combination traditionally consisted of milk, but he realized he not only enjoyed water with doughnuts but ice cream, cake, and candy as well. Perhaps psychologically, the purity of his choice liquid somehow made up for the sinful decadence of the sweets.

"Let's work up a list of these players," Slubbich suggested while tapping his middle finger on the table top for emphasis. "Starting with the incident at Cipher Coliseum, Police Force Officer Lenorox was adamant about what she believed was the Shokan's involvement in the destruction."

Pete spoke up, "Add to it the Djibouti Clan. I read the report on Sylvia's statement, and she was saying something about a blood feud between those two groups."

Having returned to the table, Julian admitted, "I'm willing to believe just about anything right now."

Vim had since taken out his slate computer and begun to type away on its face. "Noted. Hey, not to skip all the way ahead to the Shokan Dojo massacre, but if the Shokan are powerful enough to

destroy Cipher Coliseum without a trace - I mean I know what goes around comes around, but how this same thing could happen to them isn't adding up."

"There's usually always somebody bigger and badder," Pete mentioned before clarifying, "but in this case, the group that did this isn't necessarily bigger. Badder? Definitely, and I'd go as far as to say they're going to be our biggest roadblock."

This new piece of information sounded intriguing to Slubbich, so he asked outright, "What are you saying? What do you know?"

"It was part of the reason we were tardy," Julian let out. "It's the Enforcers."

Being a mercenary was a cold business - once an honorable business, but Acid Pop's affiliation with the one team that ruined it for everybody else had caused many sleepless nights. What happened when a killer for hire was no longer adjudicated by the laws falling underneath the fabled virtual guild of mercenaries, Death Corps? Restless nights for one but the undeniable penchant to sleep with two weapons was the other - wrapped within the cold sweat drenching his sheets with an ease to make the lost control of bowels proud. And there was a good chance of this occurring as well.

"H-how d-did you get in here?" Acid Pop said as he fumbled around for one of those weapons in the darkness - hidden beneath his damp sheets.

Acid Pop looked like a scared child hiding from the

boogeyman beneath the safety of these covers. But this was no man before him, and where there might have been compassion in a similar situation involving children, only a cutting laughter permeated the hot and awkward atmosphere like a cold deliverance. Finally he had located his weapon and fired an unintended D-Beam pulse through the covers sending a transparent ripple across the room.

"That one only works on Dorans," Cindra announced.

It was the wrong weapon! The terror in Acid Pop's eyes said it all, so the dumbfounded expression of his wide-open and presently occupied mouth needed not to utter any words in support.

Ironically Acid Pop's hand laser would not have worked at all with the protective properties of Cindra's combat gear, so rather than giving her frozen adversary the chance to test that theory out, she put him down within his death bed. One LUNC pulse to the face and another to the heart were sufficient, but a quick check of the minicomputer adorning the left arm of her combat suit had the biometric scan confirm the date and time of the pronouncement.

Yes the fall colors were beautiful, but the leaves in Crazeintox' gutters left little to be desired. It was something he could not leave alone because the ensuing waterfall from the clogged drainage that would then surround his roof was not only unsightly but annoying.

Without a spotter, Crazeintox made his way up the sturdy ladder carefully. The house had a second level he

was finding to actually be quite a ways up the more rungs he traversed, but there was no fear of heights within him. The mercenary's claim to fame was a Vertigo Ray he had created because he knew an opponent's equilibrium was an exploitable weakness.

Work gloves covered Crazeintox' hands in order to keep them from becoming needlessly soiled. Warmth was also being factored in because the day was cloudy and dreary with a damp, gentle rain that made the rungs slick while doing nothing for his sniffles. Talk about a win-win situation, sarcastically. After he reached the aforementioned gutter, a sturdy grip on its rim secured his balance so the rest of the climb would be a controlled one.

It was a slow climb, but Crazeintox was not in any hurry and actually savored the yard work. When all was said and done and cleaned up, there was an unbelievable sense of accomplishment that came about from such mindless, droning work. Being at peace with nature allowed him to be at one with his thoughts, so of this solitude, he relished the moment.

Crazeintox poked his head above the gutters to look all the way up and down the row, and what he saw caused a sheer bout of astonishment. The clog was packed tightly with leaves. It was unreal! He placed his gloved hand in the mushy mixture of standing water, broken branches, sediment, leaves, plus seeds - and began dropping them over the side of his position.

Being the reconnaissance specialist as well as the stuntman of the Enforcers, E-Man had done his homework on Crazeintox and wanted to take this mercenary on

specifically. Two people who laughed at heights were about to go at it, but one was unfortunately caught with his pants down - or rather, up a ladder.

But Crazeintox was not out as he caught sight of E-Man leaping down from a fighter onto his roof. There the Enforcer skidded down the shingles with a LUNC extended. Tearing his arm away from the gutter, he placed both hands on the ladder before twisting it (like stilts) away from the upper level of the house and leaning the heavy metal in the direction of his adjacent garage to the right.

The ladder crashed down onto the roof of the garage which causing some serious damage to its now dented and mangled gutters. Crazeintox made sure that, in the moment of impact, he had a decent foothold on the slippery rungs before attempting a backward roll to try and put separation between himself and his pursuer.

E-Man met Crazeintox halfway by leaping from the roof of the upper level onto the roof of the garage - LUNC still poised and without so much as even a wobble in his movements. He charged the mercenary who was now badly out of position - not from the backward roll but because of a new evasive roll off the side of the ladder.

There had not been any time for Crazeintox to question his pursuer let alone question the situation in his flight. There was also no question that any jarring on the ladder by E-Man would cause this tight window of potential escape to shut. And shut it did as the mercenary's flailing left arm got caught in the open spaces of the ladder as the Enforcer slid and kicked at the top rung already pressed awkwardly against the roof of the garage.

With the condensation on the ladder, its already rickety positioning against the roof, and an additional bit of calculative stimulus from E-Man, the hyperextension of Crazeintox' arm became the least of his concerns. The scene slowed as that roll to his left side and what he thought would drop him safely to his feet now had his left arm caught in between the rungs and the rail of the ladder as he dangled against the weight of his own frame. Savagely the mercenary's only thoughts were on righting his position with his free-swinging right hand, but those turned out to be his last thoughts.

E-Man only needed one stalled instance of panic to get Crazeintox twisting and flailing about in such a manner the mercenary would no longer be able to defend himself in the event of what was about to come. The Enforcer fired a spread of LUNC pulses toward the top end of the ladder pressed against the edge of the roof sheering the heavy metal off and causing the structure to collapse to the ground.

The registered snap was not of twigs or branches but a neck caught between an uneasy crumple of an upper body pretzel and the sturdy ladder. With the kill confirmed by E-Man's minicomputer, he tapped a few keys on its adequately-sized keyboard and summoned his fighter for extraction.

"Enforcers?" Slubbich questioned as this was his first time hearing about that outfit.

Nodding, Pete confirmed, "Uh huh. They're precise too from what I've heard and also seen."

This conversation needed to be slowed down because Slubbich was besotted with a series of questions. The first one was nearest and dearest to his heart as it centered around protocol and what the Enforcers' name referred to, "Wait, what are they 'enforcing'? I'm not too sure I should even ask where you heard this information, but like Police Force Officer Kazar just said, after seeing what we've all been introduced to recently, I'm inclined to be more open-minded as far as matters are concerned. Also what have you seen? This wouldn't happen to have anything to do with the Ennead office manager assassination would it?"

"It would indeed," Pete said before succumbing to his urge to invade the box of doughnuts. Julian's thing was to use water to wash down the taste of the sugary food, but his thing was to use the sugary food to wash down the taste of that last cigarette he enjoyed while interrogating Stalkord earlier. The rugged cop's health had not yet become a primary concern, but he did have to admit (in his new capacity as the Police Force's leader) he was doing less of the harmful things to his body. With an entire planet of Police Force officers under his command in the absence of Commissioner Gyro, he needed to take steps to hold things together physically and psychologically. It was one thing when taking detrimental actions only affected him or spread out at their widest point to merely his partner, but now selfishness had become a luxury he could no longer afford.

Julian fielded Slubbich's questions in order, "They were sanctioned by the Space Force for the purposes of enforcing the Space Force Doctrine through a strict interpretation and a much broader jurisdictional reach than we're accustomed to. As for

where we got that information, we'd rather not say in order to protect the identity of the source."

A simple nod represented Slubbich's understanding of the sensitivity and acceptance of the request for secrecy.

"I have to admit," Julian continued, "Pete and I have played fast and loose with the law in the past, but the Enforcers using this same law to do whatever it takes to keep the Space Force in power troubles me."

"Now I've read the Space Force Doctrine...", Slubbich started.

"That figures," Vim smiled.

Slubbich finished, "...and it speaks more about defensive preemption as a means to opening up the channels of communication for the purposes of achieving peace. Are we talking black ops here? If so, that's an extremely aggressive interpretation of the Space Force Doctrine."

Pete put the unfinished half of his doughnut down as this part of the meeting intrigued him. He asked, "Can you please elaborate a little further?"

"Well there are two schools of thought on what Leader One: Sebastian Cipher originally intended when he wrote the one-page Space Force Doctrine," Slubbich explained. "The first takes those words to mean the Space Force isn't an end all be all entity but subject to and bound to be held accountable by that same piece of paper. The other maintains those words can only be carried out fully if the Space Force is at the top of the food chain in order to oversee their enforcement.

One states the Space Force is fallible, capable of committing atrocities, and not created mutually exclusive of the Space Force Doctrine's laws. The other swears by their perceived

fact Leader One: Sebastian Cipher's original intent for the Space Force Doctrine was to create a set of starter principles during the formation of the Space Force that enshrine the entity itself as law.

Just to get this out in the open and on the table right now, I subscribe to the first school of thought. No person, place, or thing is above the eBook. To be honest, from my studies of the Space Force Doctrine, I found its first interpretation to be the source of the Space Force's original allure. These Enforcers and whoever sanctioned them are effectively double-dipping on the law."

"The Space Force has one hand extended perpetually in friendship while the other hand conceals a hidden LUNC behind its back," Pete reasoned.

Vim spoke up here, "It's almost like that Lady Justice statue with the sword and scales. Slubbich's first school of thought says the Space Force can be weighed on those scales whereas the Enforcers and whoever sanctioned them must believe the Space Force is the actual statue."

Acknowledging the astuteness, Julian proudly replied, "Listen to the kid go on the legal lesson."

"I can't let Slubbich have all the fun," Vim laughed.

With a playful shake of his head, Slubbich threw the conversation back over to Pete, "You said you've run up against them before during the Ennead office manager assassination. Please, you elaborate this time."

With a shrug, all Pete could offer was, "I can't explain the office manager's motivations at this point, but I'm starting to understand the Enforcers. It sure seems like they were carrying out the orders which speak to their purpose, so we need to put that aside as a given. In order to pin these guys down, we need to

figure out who's capable of pulling off the missions they're able to accomplish. Honestly the list has gotta be short on who can actually do this stuff."

Being forced to sign for packages was one of the biggest annoyances Frak Frag had to deal with, but he would surely take having to be home for a delivery in order to net the solitude of the suburbs. After signing for the package, he looked the delivery person in the eyes out of a professional habit.

It was not so much about sizing the person up as it was seeing what the person was about. This was not a competition and Frak Frag was not currently active. For if he were active, he would have seen his death coming. It might not have been a competition, but who was to say the competition ever stopped? It never did, and when he disregarded the eyes that saw into a mirror soul of his own - a foreshadowy image or vision of himself, it was assumed something like this could not possibly happen.

Well not possibly happen in this exact manner, but Frak Frag had lived by the bomb, so when his front door closed, it was only fitting he died by the bomb. He had lived off his munitions expertise for so long and managed to ring up a sizable amount of collateral damage while doing so, but at the hands of Python (the Enforcers' guerrilla style fighter) who held the detonator while walking back to the delivery truck, it would all end.

Frak Frag did not have a chance to respond, run, or

retaliate because the blast was immediately triggered and belonged to a controlled radius bomb he had never used since the devices were generally smaller and less powerful. The fact they were accurate and powerful enough happened to be reason enough as to why Python chose this particular explosive for the mission.

As the front door blew out with a hollow burp that sounded like dropping a stick of dynamite in the sewer, Python stopped for a moment to check Frak Frag's biometric scans on the same slate computer used to garner the mercenary's delivery confirmation signature. Satisfied with the results, he continued on to the delivery truck and drove off toward his next stop.

Skeptically Vim warned, "We'll never find these people. If they have the blessing and backing of the Space Force, they're probably ingrained into all the logistics channels as well as every fiber of society."

Even martial arts masters such as Hya Ku needed to venture out to the convenience store every once in a while for the purposes of stocking up on long overdue lists of groceries. His shopping cart was full, and he knew one full cart would be enough to get him through the next six months easily. Buying in bulk and maximizing coupons had a way of filling up the freezer and stretching his funds.

Most of this was routine additions though. Hya Ku rarely ever ran out of food and supplies, but he used his budget each month regardless. There was no use in saving for a rainy day if the conditions could become so bad it would be impossible to reach the convenience store. Maybe an old proverb centering around that logic was in there somewhere, or he could create one of his own.

Hya Ku did not want to be a mercenary forever. It was more of a means to an end, and he had always contemplated the idea of starting up a martial arts sect - a discipline of his making and vision from his eye. After paying dues within the corporate life, he was beginning to lean closer toward the yearn for an interpersonal fulfillment of himself.

The last stop on Hya Ku's list was the frozen food aisle. For those nights when he did not feel like being his own personal chef, a quick minute and thirty seconds came in handy with the microwave. Chicken tenders were his favorite, and vegetables or salad went perfectly with them. He contemplated getting some of the many varieties of frozen french fries but found strength enough to resist the temptation. Eating healthily had served him well in the past - every time before except for today.

"Where is the honor in a double-team?" Hya Ku said as he stood upright, placed the package of chicken back into the freezer, and allowed the freezer door to swing closed. It was audible for those who needed to hear the conversation, but this was a sequence occurring on another plain of existence.

"Where was the honor in killing kids?" Acro asked

as he stood to Hya Ku's left side leaning nonchalantly across the handle of the mercenary's shopping cart.

The cryptic response had thrown Hya Ku for a loop, "What?"

"You keep forgetting it was a different universe, Acro," Acra Lin advised while she stood directly behind Hya Ku to his right blind side.

Acro corrected, "An old friend of mine once told me nothing ever changes; it's just latent."

Acra Lin came up to stand beside Acro before they would continue off down the frozen food aisle together. The Enforcer mentioned how she thought her husband's words were, "Solid advice."

The shopping cart had been so full it did not tip over in supporting the weight of Hya Ku's slumped body. Neither Acro nor Acra Lin needed to check their biometric scanners in order to ensure the deed was done. Experience had taught them about the effectiveness of their chosen methods as well.

"Or maybe another question is," Slubbich offered, "what do we do with the Enforcers once we find them? For as twisted as their interpretation happens to be, they do have the law on their side as do we."

"I guess it's all about who has the biggest eBook - aye Slubbich?" Pete wondered.

With a shrug as even Slubbich was unsure about the ramifications of what Pete was suggesting, he simply remarked,

"Perhaps."

"If you ask me," Julian pointed out, "I think we're all forgetting about the 'How in the universe can we stop these people?' question. The Enforcers are no joke, and crossing them isn't something I'm particularly looking forward to. I'm sitting here trying to figure out how we could actually walk away from something like this."

A choral acknowledgment between Slubbich, Pete, and Vim respectively expressed the consensus of: "Good point. Da-n good point. Is this one of those times when we're supposed to turn a blind eye?"

Then there were Enforcers like Recoil who chose not to beat around the bush. After kicking in Mister Miser's front door, charging up the stairs, interrupting the mercenary's family dinner, and putting the targets on their knees duct-taped at LUNC-point, he was able to discuss the charges, "Mister Miser, you are a member of Roy's Rebels - a Death Corps team found to be in breach of the Space Force Doctrine for carrying out a series of illegal contracts on ranking Space Force officials and their families.

One of the surviving members of a failed attempt has decided to exercise a provision within the Space Force Doctrine affording additional protections to ranking Space Force officials and their family members. I'm here to enforce that provision. There's nothing for you to say, and you should've apologized to your own family well before this."

A single LUNC pulse to the back of the head put Mister Miser down. He fell forward with his bound arms unconsciously flying outward in order to brace the collapse of a new deathly slumber. Unfortunately the mercenary had died with his eyes open and was able to bare witness to his own family's fate - one he had decided for so many others with his powerful Regression Ray. Having those targets be reduced to nothingness by a weapon so carnal, it was only fitting Recoil return the favor in some small form or fashion.

"Don't worry," Recoil addressed the remainder of Mister Miser's horrified family, "I'm a professional," before squeezing his LUNC's trigger pad three additional times in order to lay out the wife and children. The biometric scans from the Enforcer's minicomputer confirmed four kills.

Humpsman Bar

The smartest moves of the paranoid often became second-guessed upon further review. Sismr Surve was smart enough to get into a public place as soon as he noticed something wrong. Really the only problem with this move was being out in the open might have just made things that much easier on whoever was gunning for his fellow mercenaries.

Somehow Roy's Rebels had been compromised. Nobody was responding. Well only Sooty Ampree responded back. Sismr's thoughts began to run wild with the implications from all this.

Could Sooty have turned? Had the New Alliance partnership soured? And what was the deal with not being able to communicate with any of the Rebels residing on Earth? As far as communications were concerned, he had been cut off (by the Space Force's well-publicized efforts) from contacting his fellow Rebels over in the Terran System as well as this team's leader - and not just in namesake, Roy Akern.

Second Earth was a sizable planet, so after carrying out the first batch of their illegal contracts, Sism and the others spread out in order to disappear for the ongoing purposes of setting up to carry out the next assignments. The cloak of Death Corps no longer masked their efforts, and if any piece of either the Earth Rebels' or Second Earth Rebels' plans failed, they would each incur the ire of the Space Force in short order. He would not know when, where, or how, but it would be swift and exacting. This was all supposed to be taken care of! There had been assurances!

Sism stared at the untasted drink sitting in front of him on the bar top. He should have known there were no such things as assurances, and speaking of which: This drink could have been tainted somehow. It was no way to live.

"Everything alright, buddy?" Dirk Combo asked. He was big stuff around here - the proprietor of the bar. A lot of shady groups and organizations hung out at Humpsman Bar, and this man was well-liked and well-respected by all of them.

It was not so much Dirk got involved in all the organized crime that often went on, was being planned, or happened to be discussed within the walls of his establishment. It was he provided a venue for it all to continue with no questions asked and only a fair tip being requested. Giving the undesirables a place to engage in business was his business. The extent of their

business dealings did not matter. Criminals indulged in hot wings and other popular bar food staples as well. They also drank - a lot sometimes, so if he did not provide a friendly atmosphere with which to accommodate them, somebody else surely would. And a site for the popular Club Soda from Earth had already been specced out in the general vicinity, so competition was looming if not certainly on the horizon.

"Yeah," Sismr lied. "Hey can I get the bottle they're drinking out of? The actual bottle, please?" If the mercenary had the bottle he was pointing to, it was safer to say the drink would not have been laced with anything. At least the gathering to his left was not keeling over, and if ever a time existed when an alcoholic beverage happened to be calling him, it was now. It was right this very instant, and he began to wonder if it was even a good idea to be drinking himself out his faculties especially where they were needed the most to either figure things out or figure a way out. This shi- was all crazy, his heart was racing, but he could barely breathe. Everything was going so fast but slow at the same time. He was stuck in some sort of limbo and mere footsteps from he--.

Obliging, Dirk slid the bottle over to Sismr while mentioning, "Hey man, it's on the house." He had played witness to this type of disconcerting scene many times in the past and knew if things had gotten to this point, then the patron sitting before him (going through them) was already dead. His offering to forgo the tab was meant to be seen as a gesture in clear deference to a last meal of sorts.

One hand - Sismr's left hand went directly to the bottle while the other continued to clutch the hand laser concealed by his jacket. He took the bottle straight to the face. At the

conclusion of the upturned bottle caressing his lips, one swig had left only a quarter of its precious liquid contents behind. Things were not any better, and worse, the mercenary did not feel any better. If anything, he felt worse for knowing matters were not about to get any better.

In all honesty, this misery would welcome some company, but the benevolent hand brushing against Sism's shoulder (for not being able to gather a soft grip or even a pat because of his flinch) very nearly startled him into pulling out his hand laser and seriously starting a scene by drawing all kinds of wrong attention toward his direction. Maybe that drink was working to calm down his jumpiness a bit since he did manage to catch himself before lashing out, so he slid the weapon back beneath his jacket but remained on edge.

"I've been looking all over this place for you," it also helped when Sooty announced his presence prior to the approach. "Why didn't you pick up your smartphone?"

Shaking his head in the negative, Sism said eerily, "They can trace that."

Confused, Sooty asked, "Who?"

"Were you followed?" Sism turned around on the bar stool to plead.

"Dude, what the fu-- is going on with you?" Sooty was a little taken aback by Sism's odd behavior. He could smell the pungent stench of alcohol on his fellow mercenary's heavy breath. "Are you drunk?"

As Sism turned back around to face the bar, he replied, "No I wish."

This was taken as a cue for Sooty to join the uneasy Sism, so he pulled up the bar stool located on his friend's right side.

"You said it was urgent. What's up?"

"Did you bring the High Intensity Beam?" Sism demanded more than questioned.

"Yes!" Sooty answered in a short manner as if he was being accused of something. "Sism, come on - level with me. What's happening to you?"

Sism just realized his back was now turned to the majority of the bar. Whoever was killing off the Rebels could be watching him currently! He scratched the back of his head before exhaling a fleeting breath of nervousness and peering over each of his shoulders. Unconsciously the mercenary raised and lowered his bent legs starting at the ankles as a continuous twitch that was psychological in nature for the purposes of revving up his lower body for the quick escape. Anxious was not the word even he could use to maybe describe himself because the powerful piston-like movement centering around his knees and hips was causing his entire body to shake visibly now. "Acid Pop, Crazeintox, Frak Frag, Hya Ku, Mister Miser - not even his wife is picking up. Man, I knew we shouldn't have done the Space Force contract shi-. We're fu--ed!"

Sooty now looked around nervously to see if anybody had heard that last part before urging, "Dude, calm down. When did you lose touch with the others?"

"It was different than losing touch with Roy and Earth," Sism rambled. "We were all so close here. Something - it just doesn't feel right."

"Did you drive over to anybody's place?" Sooty should not have even asked this question. Sism was in no condition to be able to put coherent sentences together let alone behave rationally. "I'm sure everything is alright. Only we knew about those contracts plus our employer. Why would the New Alliance want

to tell anybody about their business? Look we'll call a meeting tomorrow just to make sure everybody is safe, okay? I should get you back home."

Sisrm lay peacefully across the bar top with his left arm crossed underneath his head - fingers still on the bottle. The clinking of his hand laser as it dinged against the wall of the bar, the bar stool, and then the floor caused Sooty some concern. This collapse looked like somebody had drunk himself under the table.

When Sooty went to pat Sisrm on the upper back in as calm a manner as he could muster to illustrate an earnest amount of compassion without startling his comrade, he realized inebriation was not the case. The last mercenary from Roy's Rebels withdrew a soaked hand from his friend's collar to reveal a trail of blood emanating from around the nape of the neck!

This was not a situation of Sisrm resting peacefully on the bar top. He had tried to get his arms up in order to assess the instantaneous damage from a sniper's bullet that had wedged itself within the back of his head but failed as death succeeded in taking hold and laying him complaisantly down.

When Sooty joined Sisrm with a side-slumping posture of his own - the involuntary response of his body to the reception of the sniper's second bullet, it appeared as if they both had a little bit too much to drink. Quietly they went into the clutches of their fate, and nobody else throughout Humpsman Bar really even noticed or paid it any additional mind. For everybody else, life went on.

"Two shots," MC referred to the biometric scanner being displayed on the console within his fighter hovering next to

Chipshot's ship in the sky, "two kills."

"I only needed one," Chipshot assured as he retracted his sniper rifle and sat down in the cockpit of his fighter. On the console was a targeting feed his weapon was obviously paired with as it instantiated the exact positions of Sism and Sooty plus lethal aiming points throughout their bodies - through walls. He even had to admit this technology was scary. Neither he nor MC were even in Atro City! So for the triangulation of the software to be able to account for the sheer distance the hovering fighters were away from Humpman Bar, the possibly changing positioning of the former targets, subtle variances in his circulatory and respiratory functions that would cause exponential inaccuracy, and any number of other atmospheric shifts which could come about from sniping at two miles worth of distance; it was extremely powerful, and its very use meant the Enforcers were definitely performing at another level.

MC watched Chipshot's canopy close and then began to take off when chiding, "Yeah you only would've needed one if my target, Sooty, had been left to me. Ah well, not like even we could've known he and Sism would link up in the end."

Chipshot began to break down his sniper rifle as he commanded, "Take me to Enforcer I." The faithful fighter could be flown as a drone on autopilot, even when an occupant was sitting inside which came in handy during circumstances such as this when his hands were full. It complied with the order and skied after MC's ship. Carrying on the conversation, he said, "It's a good thing Sism and Sooty did hook up though because, unrelated, I've been meaning to send the Palatine Triad a message. What better way to do that than to do it at the expense of our assigned targets killing the last of Roy's Rebels right up under the Triad's noses

and within their favorite establishment? It'll probably garner some Police Force attention and keep them occupied for a while as well."

"True but we don't want to garner too much Police Force attention," MC advised.

"I'm not too concerned about them," Chipshot stated honestly, "because if they get in the way, I'd be more than happy to send them a message like the ones I delivered to our good friends at Ennead Tech Corp previously and the Palatine Triad just now. Resuming manual control."

Quick to take charge during a scene of doubt debilitating his unit, Pete suggested, "From here on out, everything regarding the Enforcers needs to stay within this room. The moment they catch onto us being anything other than the Space Force's lapdogs, we'd all be in some serious trouble with not a lot of immediate backup we could even bring to the fray."

With a smile, Julian stated, "I probably shouldn't admit this, but you know I'm down for whatever, Pete."

"A big part of me wants no piece of this," Vim answered truthfully when the scrutiny of the table turned to him, "since I've already been through a situation where our enemies lashed out and their actions personally affected my family. But an even larger part wonders about what could happen to my family if I did nothing."

"They say," Julian comforted, "if you see a good fight, always jump in it. But you wouldn't be alone, Vim."

Know this."

Almost decided, Vim nodded his agreement with what Julian was trying to say.

"Unfortunately," Pete spoke from his own dreaded past experience, "family being brought into a situation is often unavoidable. It's hard for - for me to say it, but the fault shouldn't belong to you. And you do not deserve the blame. I can't live in fear of what might happen, so I go on despite what happened. Nobody here would question your decision if you were to walk out the door right now."

Vim shrugged, "Nobody but me that is. I'm in."

All eyes were now on Slubbich.

"Somebody needs to keep this unit out any further shenanigans," Slubbich opined. "Let's play your game of big eBook take little eBook, Police Force Officer or should I say Acting Commissioner Rogue."

With a grin, Pete simply approved, "Alright."

Motioning toward the doughnuts, Julian announced, "We've got Slubbich on the team, and we're under new management. This is your first day, Pete. Let's celebrate some good fortunes moving forward as we buck heads with the Enforcers." He raised his cup of water.

Pete held up his half-eaten doughnut.

Slubbich toasted with his coffee.

Vim held out his bottled water.

A chorus of, "Hear, hear," concluded the meeting, and a sugar rush was to be the next order of business.

15: Unconditionally Tough

Establishing a valid inside presence was pertinent to more things than just basketball. For the Enforcers, Yori (code-named Autopsy) was their loyal insider within the Police Force. Superbly qualified for the information technology position, but how could he not have been? This man was an Enforcer plant and the best at whatever his specialty was by default.

Perhaps Autopsy's covert moonlighting status would have mattered if people like Commissioner Gyro had even known about the existence of the Enforcers earlier, but nobody did - no one was aware of the presence of this lethal black ops unit he belonged to. Sure everybody could imagine they existed from fictional stories, purposely or treasonably leaked Space Force documents, and the unfortunate occurrence of having run up against such an outfit. But nobody was in a position to even be able to do anything with the knowledge.

The Commissioner had let it slip out he knew of Autopsy's ties to the Enforcers, but the impact of the former Police Force leader was completely blunted by his pending corruption case. Whether fortunate for him or them, he was completely neutralized short of being influentially neutered. And still, an argument could be made he was actually the lucky party in all this. Although his credibility and career were both in tatters, he was able to walk away with his life intact because the newfound disgrace kept him from being seen as any sort of threat.

Additionally arguments could call into question Commissioner Gyro's competence in running a tight ship over the Police Force

with an Enforcer lurking within its midst, but this was the trade-off for finding good help. The person running the computer systems and the rest of the technology throughout the base (or any organization for that matter) needed a certain amount of autonomy to be able to handle things effectively. It was not like he could have just stood over Autopsy's shoulder and watched his technological guru work. Much of this stuff was like a foreign language anyway. The server room guy was hired for the purposes of sorting all that out so nobody else had to waste their time. Provided the infrastructure and systems continued operating in a peak condition always, no questions were asked.

Autopsy did a great job too, so his work went unquestioned. There was never any downtime, the Police Force officers always had the latest in devices or gadgetry, and the internet was fast. This was all anybody could ever ask for, so in many respects, he was a hero - the one person outside leadership throughout the base everybody tried to be on the good side of. Because ironically, if his skill was so exceptionally pronounced in maintaining everything, it was almost a certainty he also knew how to really make cubicle life tough for a person who managed to get on the wrong side of him.

There was no way to tell Autopsy was working from two different computer systems. Venturing into his work area and observing his habits would net nothing eye-catching in terms of his methods. Firewalled off and on a completely separate subnetwork from the Police Force's systems, the entire planet would have found it ironic to note he sat behind a DMZ even the Space Force did not have access into. The Enforcers were that exclusive a group. Tight-knit to the tune of suffocation as a direct result of the stranglehold they possessed on secrecy, there was not only no hope

of his cover being blown but no chance.

A separated minicomputer, looking like it originated from Enforcer combat gear, sat out atop Autopsy's desk as he received his daily reports from his official employer:

Acid Pop would be missing his rent payments from here on out, so the property owner's complaint channel needed to be rerouted to the Space Force rather than its intended and normally rightful destination of the Police Force. Petty things like this would usually be handled locally, but the mercenary's disappearance was the result of a fatal violation of the Space Force Doctrine.

Easy enough, Autopsy thought. Nothing went through to Secinol Singh's (Sec for short) dispatcher console without it first filtering through his wanton gaze, so the reroute was nothing more than routine.

Crazeintox was left in a crumple on his front lawn, and eyewitnesses could have very well gotten to the scene ahead of the Space Force's cleanup efforts. Rarely did a witness ever get the complete story from a situation, so their ability to discuss, gossip, and speculate was of no concern. The biggest prop they might remember would have been the ladder, and it was after all damp. Another fatal violation of the Space Force Doctrine and the punishment's ensuing enforcement could be masked by the simple planting of a carefully worded story in the local papers.

It was also important for Autopsy to sync the Police Force's

systems to the occurrence in order to not create a variance in the reporting. This time around, the Space Force was in the area and took care of things. Any offer of Sec's assistance would have been turned away through jurisdictional override. It was something the local authorities had gotten used to, so when a flagged report came across the dispatcher console with these types of details, the information was ordinarily filed away.

A subtle chuckle emitted from Autopsy's lips when he read about what happened to Frak Frag. This one could be chalked up to a faulty furnace and the negligence of its yearly maintenance. Simple.

The Enforcers often did their work in certain ways that caused Autopsy to have to get creative in devising a story as to why so and so was no longer alive or how such and such died in a certain manner. He was really starting to become quite spontaneous with his imagination and even contemplated testing out a profession in creative writing. Honestly being an Enforcer left him with no shortage of stories he could use to rework the original events and times, change a few names here and there, and turn them into an eBook series which would keep readers on the edge of their seats or up all night in an entertained furor.

Hya Ku was found keeling over his shopping cart, so the obvious reasoning for this was a heart attack. Sometimes people - especially martial artists just trained too intensely. Maybe there were some supplements taken that might not have gelled with his system. The aim was not necessarily to discredit the person, but adding a blemish to

their legacy in light of a fatal violation of the Space Force Doctrine (which could never be discussed openly to the public) was somehow satisfying.

How many million ways were there to die? All Autopsy needed to do was choose one. Well this was part of it. The Police Force systems would wholeheartedly support his say, but the rubber stamp of the science/medical community was another loose end to tie up for the purposes of making the ruse complete.

Atro City Hospital

"What do you have a taste for?" Terry asked Karyn as he chivalrously helped his lady friend into her coat.

"There are a ton of places around here to eat," Karyn admitted indecisively. After adjusting her shoulders to the comfort of the stylish, furry coat, she turned around to tell Terry, "I'm really happy you came back to Second Earth to see me."

Almost apologetically, Terry replied, "I know it's been lonely. I've missed you dearly. Karyn, I was hoping to tell you something over lunch. In fact, I couldn't wait for you to get off duty."

Karyn could tell Terry's admission was difficult for him to make as her man was not used to opening up for many others aside from her, and he was still having a tough time at it. "I'd quit this job for you, but I've no qualms with running through my vacation and sick time in the interim. You already know head doctors are only required for specialized procedures and staff

meetings. And nobody likes staff meetings, so with no pending procedures needing my attention or expertise, I'm indefinitely off duty albeit on call until you get situated comfortably for your stay. I don't want you sleeping in some cold shuttle. That's not how things are going to be."

"See that's the thing," Terry paused as he looked down and to his side for an uneasy moment before looking up to meet Karyn's smiling eyes and offering a smile of his own with teeth showing, "I feel like I'm proposing to you."

"You're not?" Karyn said playfully and slyly in the portrayal of her surprise that was partly anticipative. She remained prepared and would have been ready to say 'yes' in the event of Terry popping the question.

Let it never be said Terry was not at least smooth. In all his universal experience, he had at least picked up a spine when it came to conversing with and talking to women. A massive dose of confidence accompanied what could be referred to as 'mad game' when he dropped one of his best lines on Karyn in response, "I was saving the proposal for dinner."

'Wow' would have been the only thing Karyn could say, but it went without saying because she was honestly stunned. Her heart was a flutter with an increased anticipation cradling this new frozen state into the necessary stall of a fainting collapse.

"I don't," now Terry's gaze met Karyn's unflinchingly when he announced, "want to leave you this time. At the same time, I realize you have an important position here on Second Earth. I'm still a consultant for the Space Force, so I can definitely find some work out this way. Like I said before, my previous assignment is in good hands. I made sure to leave things better off when I left them than when I found them, so you've become the only concern

of mine. I love you, Karyn, and I want to be with you in a true sense - no more of this long distance stuff."

A related piece of information was to be Karyn's answer, "You know I've been completely faithful to you all this time?"

Terry shook his head, "It's the pattern with us. If we're not drowning ourselves in our work, we're drowning ourselves in each other. All I could think about was getting things in a position where we could finally and legitimately be together.

I'd lost my way a little while back. No it had nothing to do with cheating or anything like that. Karyn, you were my anchor in sanity. Some decisions I made forced me to have to reevaluate my status - my worth. And I know I'm being super cryptic, but I also want you to know," he moved in closer to his lady friend when speaking these next words, "I've become a better person because I need to exceed your wildest expectations."

"There's so much I don't even know about you," Karyn reciprocated her man's close-quartered breath with the tickle of her own soft voice, "but you need to know I have my secrets as well. In your absence, I had to keep myself busy. It shouldn't affect anything between us as I expect whatever you're harboring shouldn't, but even if both sets managed to somehow creep up which I can't imagine they would, our love is strong enough to endure.

Parsecs couldn't even keep us apart when we were furthest away from each other, and no other came before that love. This, in itself, says something about where our heads, hearts, and bodies are at with the relationship," she initiated the kissing before pulling away to finish her thought, "so please know I too have done some soul-searching in order to become a better-rounded person who'd be worthy of your love. Let our pasts try to tear us apart, and each will be in for a fervent surprise regarding what it is we

both have to bring to the table now."

"What skeletons do you have in your closet?" Terry questioned skeptically before pressing his lips back to Karyn's.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Karyn replied when she came up for air.

Suddenly beeps emanated from Karyn's purse back on her desk interrupting the session of lip-lock. The kiss was such a tease to Terry as he found himself overheated yet understimulated. They would have taken each other right here but realized a carnality of the situation was causing them to put some much needed distance between the workplace and the attraction of their yearning loins.

With the distinct sound Karyn's minicomputer was making, it was easy to locate within the jumbled innards of her purse. Terry caught sight of the device, and being the technophile he was, his curiosity got the better of him when he asked, "What is that? Seems too big to be a new type of smartphone."

Already typing away on the adequately-sized keyboard to the minicomputer, Karyn mentioned, "It's nothing," as she received the orders from her true employer. "I just need to take care of one more thing."

Sometimes, as was the case with Hya Ku, her approval of Autopsy's prognosis was cut and dry. Karyn liked it when Enforcers matters were believable. In authoring the death certificates, it was infinitely harder to refute the head doctor's credible findings, so she along with the inside presence within the Police Force Base completed a triangle of the covert where their black ops unit became the head of this veil of secrecy.

Other times, her fellow Enforcers went a little overboard on the thoroughness, but this was to be expected when the order for the violation of the Space Force Doctrine was sent down and needed to be enforced. Mister Miser and his entire immediate family were executed because the material breach of the Space Force's constitution called for punitive damages to cross generational lines. With regard to cases like these, Karyn was compelled to set about a bit of damnatio memoriae erasing any trace of the perpetrator's existence in the process from a science/medical standpoint and replacing the record with something else - anything else or anybody else. The morgue was actually filled with cadavers who did not have a personal story, but would have one now as they shifted into an unenviable position of put-upon worth.

With the rubber stamp applied, Karyn placed the minicomputer back in her purse, gathered her total belongings, and turned around to face Terry who seemed to be a bit uneasy as he peered out the window to her office. He was not distant or nervous but not relaxed either, and the contrast was noticeable because it differed so dramatically from moments earlier.

"You just can't get away from it," Terry stated in a sarcastic reference to his own past. He had felt an energy one could only feel at an Ethereal level, but to put it in terms for those of the lower beings who might have been curious: A rage of unimaginable proportion had just sent the need for restraint throughout the fabric of the universe as a shiver of powerlessness or its ensuing paralysis from up and down his spine, elicited an appeal for forbearance like any situation of chaos where anger and

irrationality got the better of wronged parties, and caused an onlooker such as him to be unluckily present to witness the eerie fallout.

"What's wrong?" Karyn walked over to Terry's side and inquired.

Turning away from the window, Terry told Karyn, "If I were to tell you it was nothing, I would be lying. And I'd be a fool to mouth something so uncharacteristically false when I knew the situation was nothing less than dire or severe. Sure you still want me?"

Squeezing Terry's arm as if to usher him out her office, Karyn made clear, "Tell me when you can. Since our love isn't in question, it doesn't really matter what else is. We'll get through it together regardless. I love you, Terry. And if the only thing I know about you is you love me too, then honestly that's enough for me."

"Will you still feel the same way when the universe is tearing itself apart and I didn't tell you what I knew earlier?" Terry asked pointedly as he watched Karyn close and lock the door to her office.

"I've come to find out the universe is always trying to tear itself apart," Karyn said. "It's like an unavoidable constant, but I've since also made some friends who can protect you - who can protect us both. See, Terry, I don't know what you and the Space Force are into, and I don't care. Whatever happens, happens. And I don't want to waste this time I finally now have with you worrying about what's going to happen tomorrow. It cheapens today, and we've been apart from each other for far too long. We're finally together, so I could care less if the universe decided to come for us."

Terry assured, "Oh it will."

Karyn reassured, "Then let it."

"You really have changed," Terry acknowledged Karyn's surety of purpose. He realized this would become an asset in the future but also knew his lady friend had no idea what was about to come down. She was incapable of comprehending exactly what he had just now prepared for during the aftereffects of his dark epiphany. If these new friends of hers could make any sort of impact or even a tiny dent in the tidal wave of despair he was forecasting, their contribution would be most welcome.

"As have you," Karyn appreciated Terry's continued willingness to confide what little he did in her. No she may not have been able to fully comprehend what he was talking about or going through, but it was her man's nonverbal communication that told her what she needed to know. He was genuinely afraid - of what she knew not. It terrified her in a sense the details would not be discussed for some time. At the end of the day, this head doctor was an Enforcer, so people would be quite surprised to know what types of things she had actually seen.

The Second Earth Special Police Force Base

Part of what made the Enforcers so powerful was everybody in their ranks understood their role. Autopsy nor Karyn needed to pull any trigger pads, but they could be called on within a moment's notice to do that as well if needed. Because they performed their duties so admirably, their participation in the ground game was unnecessary. One part enforcement, one part

concealment, and one part inducement - all parts of this were well thought-out and carried out at some of the highest levels throughout Second Earth.

Sisrm and Sooty would be easy to deal with, and the story behind their deaths did not even require any sort of cover-up or masking - only clouding of the truth. It was here the ultimate truth, as the Enforcers saw things, would be introduced into the feed that would eventually reach Sec's dispatcher console. More of a strategic foothold over their enemies could be gained with this method of leveraging the Police Force's actions.

Last on Autopsy's list were a pair of kills that could be blamed on the underworld court held in the streets. Snitches from a never-ending database would be implicated and fingers would be pointed in the direction of potential culprits whether they had anything to do with it or not. Sometimes the conviction or the confusion of the chase was the only thing important to a public unconcerned by details. As long as there was a sense the Police Force was on the trail of some bad people again technically indistinguishable from them chasing their own tail, the public was satisfied. Never mind the fact the bad people or organized criminal elements, in this instance, were actually innocent of any wrongdoing. To a normal civilian, they had done things illegally in the past to net the crime tag associated with them currently, so what they managed to be taken down for would usually become irrelevant in the scheme of things. It was the classic corrupt prosecutor's modus operandi.

This time, the Palatine Triad would be the target of the

misplaced ire as they had been causing problems for the Space Force and the Space Force's allies (such as Stanislaw's Penetration Elimination group) as of late. With the pressure of the Police Force about to come down on them like no other, another potential enemy of the Enforcers was about to find themselves made to become completely powerless against the momentum of public sentiment and the obligation of public servants.

Oftentimes the participation of the ground game was unnecessary when Autopsy had other unsuspecting pieces working for or doing the work of (rather) the Enforcers. He knew it was nice to have a savvy veteran such as himself who could free the rest of the unit up to put their emphasis on dealing with much more problematic elements of greater significance than petty organized crime - namely the Doran Aristocracy and the remainder of the converted Shokan.

The Brael Moonbeam

"It's odd I get a second chance to make a good first impression on parents of Billy," Sylvia told Sanjuana.

"If he so accepts his place as the son of Glove and the grandchild of Claw," Sanjuana surmised, "then the Shokan will almost certainly be delivered into another generation of existence under his tutelage."

Sylvia and Sanjuana waited graciously outside an office in order to allow Glove, Commander, and Billy an overdue opportunity to bond as a family. They spoke among themselves in an allied sense. The Doran Aristocracy and Shokan were in league with one

another, so the comfort level at which they spoke to each other was nothing short of compelled by treaty if not genetically imposed or an indelibly trained response respectively.

Understanding the darker points of Billy's twisted history, Sylvia questioned, "Do you believe he'll shun his surrogate family and the Djibouti Clan lineage so easily?"

Always positive in regard to Shokan matters, Sanjuana shook his head affirmatively when claiming, "Of course. I've faced Billy. He's powerful enough to have his cake and eat it too if he so chooses."

"That's not exactly what I meant," Sylvia clarified, "because this decision of how his surrogate family and the Djibouti Clan will react might not be Billy's to make. I don't want to see him get hurt anymore over this, and we need to be prepared to help him in any ugly event rearing its head."

"Absolutely," Sanjuana nodded his agreement, "to the glory of the Shokan. We'll both be there for him in whatever he needs."

Billy had been wronged on all sides. The Shokan had allegedly made some moves of savagery as far as the Smith family was concerned. Before him stood the bastard son of Claw - named Glove, the spawn of the original Shokan leader's having raped Billy's surrogate grandmother. That incident left both his surrogate grandparents murdered, but this man before him was his father.

With the Shokan ultimately locked in a blood feud with the Djibouti Clan, Billy's Master Acro had stolen the child of Glove and Commander - him away for delivery to Johnny Smith and Charlene Eriksen-Smith (his surrogate parents) in an attempt to make them more whole from the barbaric actions of Claw (his biological

grandfather) by claiming a life in exchange for the lives of the murdered Smith family patriarch and matriarch. This seemingly put an end to the enemy martial arts clan's leadership bloodline. Honestly it was brilliant but still wrong.

There was no indication Glove and Commander might not have been capable of taking the Shokan in a different direction than that of the past leadership, and Acro's tit for Claw's tat caused Billy's biological father to become somewhat worse than the original Shokan leader ever was throwing everybody and everything away for basically this one moment of reunion. It was how any father would have reacted.

And of Billy's biological mother, he did not even know where to start. With Glove, he only knew what he had been told - which suffice it to say was surprisingly thorough and accurate. But his surrogate family and his Master Acro, in particular, had held back information regarding Commander. Perhaps they did not know where she was at, or maybe they just did not go out their way to find her. He was so torn right now with his thoughts in a jumble, his allegiance in flux, and his familial feelings now disputed.

"Where do I even begin?" Billy stood before Glove and Commander. Pleading while holding back additional tears, he said, "I want to know everything about you."

Somewhat ruining the ambience was Glove coughing uncontrollably. Drawing the gazes of both Commander and Billy, he appeared to be sickly in his thinly frail posture. This was not the same picture of the man who had fought across two universes with an unmatched strength of conviction to retrieve his son. This was a man who looked like he had achieved his life's work and was getting ready to move on.

Compassion for Glove was not something Billy was used to

showing because of the atrocities perpetrated by his biological father against his Djibouti Clan brethren, so in this instance, he needed to stow the feelings of the past and treat that man like any other ailing person. He wondered, "Are you alright, Father?"

"Hearing you refer to me as your father," Glove meekly looked upward as a former shell of himself to say while doing a poor job of holding back some of his own tears, "has made everything," he paused to hack at his side so as to not have forgotten his manners and deportment in being sick, "worth the sacrifice. I love you, Billy - my son."

"Tell him how you feel," Commander urged. Her eyes were foreshadowy, and the sentiment seemed like more of a suggestion than a request. Why?

"I love you too," Billy looked away from Commander and met a needful expression in Glove's paining face, "Father." His biological parents knew something. For as screwed up as the Djibouti Clan student's life had been to this point, he could tell something was just not right.

As if netting a long sought approval, Glove nodded happily with a smile before politely excusing himself, "I'm going to - I'm going to retire to my quarters and give you two time to get to know each other." He patted Billy on the shoulder and trudged his way toward the outside of the office.

Sanjuana placed a left hand over the sling immobilizing his right arm within it. Billy was strong in giving him the injury but merciful in not going any further with things outside the hyperextension. Running his left hand across the injured appendage caused him to wonder aloud, "What's it like to be converted? The power?"

Answering honestly, Sylvia replied, "Wonderful. It's marvelous to be a part of this Doran culture," but she prefaced her response, "although genetically I'm incapable of believing otherwise about my situation."

"Eh?" Sanjuana was puzzled.

"The only reason I can even admit this fact to you," Sylvia explained, "is because the Aristocracy happens to be the one sect of Dorans that tends to veer away from forcibly bending their people to its will. As with any culture, there's almost always a possibility, but with the Doran people and the concept of genetic rank, it's easy to do."

This piece of news was difficult for Sanjuana to stomach, so he looked for the positive in the negative, "But your increased abilities -"

Cutting Sanjuana off, Sylvia made clear, "It doesn't mean anything. I didn't want this. And for those who do, I pity you. To belong to something that's supposedly greater but requires your autonomy is nothing short of slavery. You refuse to see it, and you don't believe me - you won't believe me until it's too late, and then you can't believe me."

Stifling Sanjuana's ability to stubbornly refute Sylvia's unbiased evidence with none of his own aside from blind allegiance was the emergence of Glove coming from out the office. Looking incredibly feeble, the leader of the Shokan hobbled past them in almost an elderly yet sage manner.

"I'll be alright," Glove stopped to say after sensing the concern in Sylvia's and Sanjuana's stares. He was by no means as aged as he currently appeared to be, and the immediacy of his statement was unclear. Would the Shokan leader be alright before or after his health further deteriorated into taking a turn for the

worse?

Hurrying to Glove's side, Sanjuana moved to aid the Shokan leader back to his quarters. The help was humbly accepted, so they continued on while Sylvia stood watching on - hoping for Billy's sake things would turn out okay.

With the door having slid closed behind Glove's exit, Billy turned to basically interrogate Commander, "What is up with him?"

Commander answered some question, "You spent your entire life hating Glove while he spent your entire life loving you. Do not make this any harder on him than you already have."

"Wait," had Billy just been reprimanded? He wondered as his confusion continued, "Mother, please. Tell me what's happening."

"Stop," Commander hauled off and delivered a backhand slap to Billy's face in the enunciation of her disdain, "acting like a spoiled child, and step up to claim your birthright."

If it were anybody else, Billy would have easily blocked the blow, but from the haze of astonishment in that the aggression came from his mom, he found himself dropped to his knees before her by the sheer force of the attack alone. Tears once again clouded his vision as Commander stood dominantly over him. She was so powerful the Djibouti Clan student noticed as he began to shake subtly and cower overtly.

Neither Dyoogie Discipline nor Shokan training was necessary for Commander as her experience came from having navigated the treacherous pathways throughout the government of the Doran Aristocracy to become its Queen. She had then managed to work her way through the various Space Force ranks, yet none of this seemed to resonate with the once cocky, unacceptably disrespectful, and emotional mess of a son who flinched before her upon approach. "It

is your fault this day has come to pass. I should blame Johnny and Charlene for making you soft. I should have Acro and Acra Lin executed for their villainy. And you, Billy - I should disown you for allowing the lot of them to poison your mind."

These accusations were tearing away at Billy's very core of existence. The words were cutting him deeply without any sort of blood having been spilt. He countered, "Fu-- this. You shouldn't have let them take me!"

"I still have a daughter left," Commander sniped as she turned her back to Billy shattering his entire universe.

The realization Billy had a sister did not quite hit or resonate with the disapproval of Commander crushing what was left of his resolve. He was destroyed. His heart was broken. He could not stop crying. All his power and training meant nothing at this moment. After so much time had passed with them being apart from each other, the loss of any sort of approval was devastating him to the nth degree.

Submissively Billy dropped his head to the floor while he stretched to reach out for Commander's legs. She kicked his weak attempt at diffusing this situation away causing him to collapse onto his belly like a shunned and defeated child who could no longer negotiate the path to composure. He had quickly become putty in her hands, and a sinister smile crossed her lips to confirm the intent of her cold actions.

The walk to Glove's quarters was taking longer than usual, so he made small talk, "You've always been one of my most loyal Shokan."

"Of course, Master," Sanjuana felt his track record in this regard went without saying. "Please, save your strength."

"No," Glove disagreed, "I have one more request for you."

It was so annoying how useless Sanjuana's right arm had become, but he made due in guiding Glove with his left arm. How embarrassed his master must have felt in being associated with him. The Shokan raised a valid point, "You heap praise on me and make continued requests for my assistance, but am I not anything more than just a disgraced servant?"

Glove sighed as the door to his quarters had finally been reached, "Whether you are or aren't makes no further difference to me. My last request is for you to serve my son well. If you need to rededicate yourself to the role you fill within the Shokan, then that's your requirement. But you must do this for me. You must thrive, survive, and stay alive. Protect my son with the fury through which I fought to recover him."

"Yes," Sanjuana was taken aback by the 'last request' part of things but acknowledged, "of course, Master. Please just rest now." He ushered Glove inside the room before attempting to take his leave.

Not quite a death grip of Glove's right claw-gloved hand on Sanjuana's left hand, but it was a tighter handshake than normal. If only his Shokan disciple had clearly known what he was implying and why he did not want to be left alone as that door slid closed.

A visible purple energy then traced and highlighted the lintel, jambs, and sill:

"Are you satisfied with the outcome?"

A past of treachery and selling his soul had finally caught up to Glove. As his head dropped, he began to break down when he admitted (happily of the results but sadly of his continued role in the outcome's unfolding) a disheartening cry of, "Yes."

Vector Oblivion's luminescent purple eyes shone through the

darkness at the far end of the room - a part yet to be approached.
He decided, "Then your debt to the Pillorian Regime need be repaid."

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