

Previously on The Enforcers....

Episode 01

"Fifth or seventh floor?" Julian asked. "Man, this shi- is suspect. Where is 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 of 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 that they have dojos popping up all around the universe."

Sylvia disagreed while pointing toward the center of the football field-sized ring. "No way, Vim - 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 that 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 had just exited while pretending to be talking on his smartphone."

Julian simply stared at Pete in awe of these lofty pronouncements, but 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 that 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 that 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 are 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 which you both had to endure."

Episode 05

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

"I wanted to sincerely apologize for the way that 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 that 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 which sniper rifles utilized, and 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 who were outside 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 that 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 to 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, and her car did not flip over from the passenger side impact, plus 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 of the vehicle in the opposite direction of the collision and curled into the fetal position as he completed a forward one hundred and eighty degree somersault - catching the adversary in midair and ringing the assailant's neck before spiraling, himself, in the same motion (which was 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 (which resulted 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 - just to make sure that it was done.

Episode 09

It was something that Commissioner Gyro could not take the total credit for as it was his skills of deductive reasoning which should have been commended, "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 who we wound up calling Enforcers. I was not the first ranking Space Force official to be attacked - I'm sure, and I know that I wasn't about to be the last. He requested that I create a channel which ran up to me but was ultimately independent of 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 that 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 that 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 will die today."

"Wrong on both accounts," Billy stated as he blindsided Sanjuana with a right cross which 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

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The Enforcers: Freedom to Wield Will

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To live in the now ensures that 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 of 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 that there is to see, so there's always a possibility of my being wrong. Believing that I am 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 Cobolgoth thought. He entered behind Slubbich and followed closely as it appeared that 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, it's a precursor which 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 that I don't do coffee," Vim sighed. His partner, on the other hand, was fun to watch as it appeared that Slubbich took an extra amount of pride in each and every hand motion which was used to retrieve a cup from the stack that resided 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 of the creation in such a manner that 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 that 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 that the impulse buyers who are running in for a quick item or two will notice the disparity, so that's another reason as to why 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 which housed the larger coolers, "and that's what I mean. You never know who is whom. You never know which is what. That 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 which were crowding her grasp onto the checkout counter.

MC had a couple packs of soft drinks which happened to be 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 that 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 that was done literally for the purposes of coercing a confession out of a suspect - whether truthful or not, and 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 which were about to be employed by the crafty Police Force officers who stood 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 the 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 in which Pete and Julian had snatched him out of his corporate offices - from off of 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 he 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, and 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, and Pete and Julian were going to get themselves killed by pursuing the paths that they happened to be on - irrespective of the vision which they needed in order to traverse such a treacherous terrain. And what happened to be most ironic was the fact that their deaths would not even come by his hands or anybody associated with him. See, that was the scary part which he needed to rectify immediately, and he chose to do so by dropping his guard - if only momentarily.

Another of the benefits of this room was the ability for Pete to smoke indoors as 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, the New Alliance, the Pillorian Regime, the Doran Aristocracy, the Doran Military, the Ronds, the Sloggs, the Rylaea. You want to act like I pull strings; they...pull strings. The reason as to why I am not and will never be afraid of you is because I've had to deal with these factions. The reason as to why 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 that 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 is exactly my point," Stalkord claimed. "I had to

call in the Palatine Triad to take out Staines Warehouse District with the Space Force weapons that Ennead Tech Corp was supposed to be disposing of because you're too busy chasing after your own tail which 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 which we have not 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 that you're not naive enough to believe that 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 which 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."

That's a long story, but let's focus in on the Space Force and how heavy-handed they're becoming because 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 that 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 who happened to be doing the interrupting now in order to keep the flow of the discussion on pace with the cadence which he believed was the most conducive for Pete and Julian's receptiveness, "but you'll soon understand what it was that she had done."

The Space Force wants Second Earth to be subservient and

docile and at odds with itself so that 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 happened to be his favorite from the device that 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 that you overstepped your bounds in once again accosting Stalkord, but now is the time that we must move forward...on all matters.

You know that 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 happened to be as infiltrated with spies as the Second Earth Special Police Force. Stalkord would've given you the information which you had demanded long ago if it was within his power to do so, but Retsepar did not turn out to be core Death Corps. He was more of a plant which means that his sole purpose was to create a distraction which would take your most hated enemy's focus off of where it needed to be because of the constant harassment that was 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 had always 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, but the fact that the device was not with their former leader and in the hands of who they had perceived to be one of their greatest foes meant that the cognitive dissonance had all but been broken up among them. The only thing that they could do was remain silent and listen intently as the recording continued.

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

Yes, Sylvia. I had figured Yori out but neglected to realize the larger implication of what my deductive reasoning held in store for me. The moment that I let out the fact that I knew and he knew that I knew - the Space Force also knew. From there, I went from being someone who they could manipulate to somebody who 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 is a betrayal within that story which I'll need to address, but it does not belong to Yori. Back to Sylvia though, she played a card which gave me a reason to not have to be around. It was so well-played that even I didn't recognize it initially, and although the Space Force might not have seen it either, my discharge gave me the chance which I needed to escape their view before they picked up on the scent of the actual deception.

Thanks to Stalkord's logistics channels, I have slipped my way through the Space Force's severing of communications with the

Terran System and am headed to Earth. Apparently, I am one of two people who was 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 that this was pitched to me was fraught with lies and half-truths.

I was told that these Enforcers were a group which was independent of the Space Force and would be used to keep the Space Force in check from individuals within the Space Force who would want to do it harm. I later realized that the Enforcers were a group which happened to be 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 would question them. Governments have been doing this forever, and I believe that sometimes we become a little ideological whenever someone steps up and says that they're above certain types of behavior and tactics which have plagued societies since the fallacy of order was conceived. Philosophical debates aside, our reality is that you are going to have your hands full in protecting Second Earth, and this is only the part that I know about.

I'd like to get the other person's take on this, and it's almost assured that 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 of 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 bee line 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 that I could leave on a family trip - not to Earth, obviously, and certainly not with the date of my pending 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, but if the Space Force gets...when they get suspicious, this can become messy.

But I know that 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 of this treachery. I've seen more honorable times when a day's work paid a decent wage, and you could hold your head high, plus 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 up and twisted up that it probably couldn't even figure out how to do that correctly."

About the only thing more astonishing than the fact that

Slubbich just used turn signals while backing his car out of its space in the store parking lot was the fact that he was actually driving five miles per hour - as per the various signs which posted the speed limits. It was unclear as to whether or not his jovial mood was in response to the feeling that he felt when following the rules or the thought of digging into the spread of doughnuts which 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 which happened to be shielding his face as he scooped 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 were doing a great disservice to entire populations of people. In the time that 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 question. 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 would 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 which you outlined offers a license for anarchy, and I guarantee you that the anarchists will turn around and be no different if not worse in their tactics than those of whom 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 which you outlined?" Vim wondered.

"Fortunately, I believe that all things are possible when we do things by the eBook," Slubbich replied, "but between you and me, let's hope that 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 out a thoroughness of effort.

The Shokan had grown organically throughout the universe

with a training program which 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 the morning hours meant that they were closing in on the origination of the influx which they voraciously sought. And in this game, there was no use in putting off until the night what could be done in the daytime 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 which was suffering from a bout of rush hour traffic.

Immediately, Acro spotted a convoy below and began to open up with indiscriminate laser barrages which chose not to waste any shots with warnings. As for the innocent bystanders - well, the morning commuters would best be served by moving out of 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 that 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 which was running trailer.

The doors to this van swung open and nearly closed back when they bounced against any give which was allowed by their hinges and reacted to the high speeds that were 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 which happened to be 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 which was going to run this chase into a bumper-to-bumper slowdown freed Acro up to get a lock on the van that he had been hounding. The ninja launched a missile into the rear of that vehicle which exploded the front of it while blowing the laser rifle-toting Shokan out the back of it. If the early morning commuters did not take the carnage of the burning vehicle or the bodies which had flown from it into the path of other vehicles that were testing out their braking distance as a sign that 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 which 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 that 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 which 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 which ate up the pavement (ahead of the vehicle) that 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 that charred the highway and further compromised 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 which surrounded the occurrence. It was either the culture of the times or the times of the culture which kept Acro from having to worry about the future implications of having flown a fighter along a busy highway and taken 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 that 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 who wished 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 that their parents probably happened to be unaware that 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 which began to fill the intersection. This momentary pause gave Acro an unrequired opportunity that 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 on top of the roof and a forward roll toward the front of the vehicle which was probably used to gain some semblance of balance. Uneasily, they clutched at their laser rifles. Out of 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 side and passenger side seats put the driver and the passenger who was 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 came 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 who was in the foreground and on his left. The person collapsed to the floor of the van as there was not much else that 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 who was standing in the background on his right.

Now in the center of the melee, Acro pushed to lock up with the Shokan who was 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 which had just been loosed by the Shokan who was 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 which peppered the person during unconsciousness and pressured 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 that 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 (which was 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 that 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 which was 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 that was 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 hyper-extended and ultimately wrecked (for the time being) right arm.

The driver stayed rightly focused on the road forward during all of the inquiries and checks for well-being.

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 that 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 which can blind his eyes to

the transfer."

Sanjuana was all for 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 of 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 that I couldn't refuse - one where I'm not quite sure as to why my surrogate family or my 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 would react. My responsibility is not to make you have to choose but to provide you with all the information so that, 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 who 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 that those personalities had been suitably altered for some purposes which were 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 which happened to be crossed arms on top of 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," Karyn replied while rubbing her weary eyes and rubbing away her previously blurry 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 that 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 has been either one of the benches in the shuttle which 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. Healthcare is a big deal on Second Earth because the inhabitants can afford to demand the best which is interesting, but I am seeing a lot more preventative screenings, so that is very encouraging. That's 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 of 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 which were 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 little bit, but we acquired some special, new talent which 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 when 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 which Karyn was expecting. A twinge of tartness caused her mouth to pucker from the welcome flavor that actually mirrored 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 which 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 that 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 that his nontouted talents would be called upon. For her, these additional responsibilities of an added assignment happened to be 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 who she happened to be close to. Although difficult, this one point made the decision simple in her mind. There were reasons as to why Second Earth was the utopia which the advertisements presented in its portrayal. There were reasons as to why 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 that not only would this justification be enough for the glossing over of their secretive behavior to continue but that 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 from the rubble, and 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 through which the perpetrator had gone or was

willing to go happened to be 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 which is chaotic that seems to be going on around here."

The Brael Moonbeam

Billy and Sylvia slipped underneath a ticketing gate which was attached to a booth near the ground level entrance to a parking structure that was connected to an Ennead Tech Corp satellite office before hurrying inside. It was filled with cars as, for all intents and purposes, this happened to be a normal working day, except their destination was not a new set of wheels but the elevator which was toward the back of the winding structure.

Sylvia led the entire way, so once inside the elevator, she circumvented the numbered buttons which would have led to any of the associated parking structure levels by placing the palm of her hand on the DNA Recognition/Authorization plate which sat 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 have we gotten ourselves into?"

"As long as we get ourselves out of it together," Sylvia answered, "I suppose that 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 which had a three hundred and 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, and 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 which created a design that was both elegant and powerful. The other piece to the ship was the cockpit section which protruded nobly out of the center. All in all, the Peculiar Class vessel looked like a well-formed 'W' with ellipsoid features.

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

"The good Dorans," Sylvia said simply, "who split off from the Doran Military which actually happens to be a subset of the New Alliance who I am sure that 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 a measure of comfort in its self-assurance.

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

If this was true, another da-ning omission happened to be one more thing that Billy's surrogate family and Acro had not so simply forgotten to mention or left out purposely. He had not known or been aware of any divisions within the Doran order - ethnocentric as it was to believe that 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 was descending into an unloading platform within the Brael Moonbeam was his faith in the words of those (who 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 of U-Gun-toting Doran Aristocracy soldiers who wore their traditional crimson red battle garb, the ditched car's driver, Sanjuana, Glove who at first glance appeared to be ailing, and a woman who needed no introduction.

Storming out of 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 which poured 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, and 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 that he had yet to pay. To see Billy accept him for who he was as a father who did go to any lengths to find his son happened to be indescribable outside of the outpour of emotions which caused 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 which 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 that this is one of the stereotypes about cops which I don't really mind?" Julian explained as he entered the conference room and took a gander at the spread of doughnuts that Slubbich had amassed.

"I don't think that 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 that 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, the Ennead office manager - I'm going to call it an assassination, the Staines Warehouse District investigation, the Shokan Dojo massacre, and Retsepar. All of these are seemingly random events, but Julian and I are coming to realize that 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 inevitably 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 of their way to hide, deflect attention from them, 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 is involved in all this mayhem is daring us to take them on so that 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 that was adjacent to the side with the door. Oddly, nothing said filling to him like sugary foods and water. The combination traditionally consisted of milk and sugary foods, but he realized that he not only enjoyed water with doughnuts but ice cream, cake, and candy as well. Perhaps psychologically, the purity of his liquid of choice in some way 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 that - 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 is not adding up."

"There's usually always somebody who happens to be 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 that 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 as to why 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 which fell 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 which drenched his sheets with an ease that would 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 who was 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 which involved 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 which sent 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 which adorned the left arm of her combat suit had the biometric scan that confirmed 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 that he could not leave alone because the waterfall which ensued 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 which he was finding to actually be quite a ways up - the more rungs that he traversed, but there was no fear of heights within him. The mercenary's claim to fame was a Vertigo Ray which he had created because he knew that 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 which 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 that the rest of the climb would be a controlled one.

It was a slow climb, but Crazeintox was not in a hurry and actually savored the yard work. When all was said and done and cleaned up, there was an unbelievable sense of accomplishment which came 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 on top of 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 came crashing down onto the roof of the garage which caused 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 which was 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 that 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 which was pressed against the edge of the roof - sheering the heavy metal off and causing the structure to collapse to the ground.

The snap which registered was not of twigs or branches but a neck that happened to be 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 what I've 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 applied to, "Wait, what are they 'enforcing'? I'm not too sure that I should even ask you 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 which he enjoyed while interrogating Stalkord earlier. The rugged cop's health had not yet become a primary concern, but he did have to admit that (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 who were 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 which 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, "that 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 school of thought takes those words to mean that the Space Force is not an end all be all entity but subject to and bound to be held

accountable by that piece of paper. The other school of thought maintains that 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 that 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 that 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 which enshrine the entity itself as law.

Just to get this out in the open and on the table right now, I subscribe to that 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 that the Space Force can be weighed on those scales whereas the Enforcers and whoever sanctioned them must believe that 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 that you've run up

against them before - during the Ennead office manager assassination. Please, you elaborate this time."

With a shrug, all that 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 is capable of pulling off the missions that 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 that 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 that the competition ever stopped? It never did, and when he disregarded the eyes which saw into a mirror soul of his own - a foreshadowy image or vision of himself, it was assumed that 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 that 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 which he had never used since the devices were generally smaller and less powerful. The fact that 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 which 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 that had been 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 the backing of the Space Force, they're probably ingrained into all of 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 that 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 happened to be 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 that it would be impossible to reach the convenience store. Maybe an old proverb which centered 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 a vision from his eye. After paying dues within the corporate life, he was beginning to lean closer and 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 healthfully 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 that was in his hand 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 which was happening 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 that 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 that 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 of her husband's words that she thought it was, "Solid advice."

The shopping cart had been so full that 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 that the deed was done. Experience had seemingly 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 that 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 that we're all forgetting about the 'How in the universe can we stop these people?' question. The Enforcers are no joke, and crossing them is not something that 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 the Enforcers who chose not to beat around the bush - like Recoil. 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 who happens to be found 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 which affords additional protections to ranking Space Force officials and their family members. I am 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 that he had decided for so many others with his powerful Regression Ray. Having those targets be reduced to nothingness by a weapon which was so carnal, it was only fitting that 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.

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 that something happened to be wrong. Really, the only problem with this move was that 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 who resided on Earth? As far as communications were concerned, he happened to have 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, Sismr 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 the Second Earth Rebels' plan 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!

Sismr stared at the untasted drink which sat in front of him on the bar top. He should have known that 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 shadeball 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 that Dirk got involved in all the organized crime which often went on, was being planned, or happened to be discussed within the walls of his establishment. It was that 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," Sism lied. "Hey, can I get the bottle that they're drinking out of? The actual bottle, please?" If he had the bottle which he was pointing to, it was safer to say that the drink would not have been laced with anything. At least the gathering to his left was not keeling over, and if there was a time when an alcoholic beverage happened to be calling to 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 of his faculties - especially where they were needed the most to either figure this out or figure a way out of this. This shi- was all crazy, his heart was racing, but he could barely breathe. Everything was happening 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 Sism 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 that if things had gotten to this point, then the patron who happened to be sitting before him (going through them) was already dead. His offering to forgo the tab was meant to be seen as a gesture which was in clear deference to a last meal of sorts.

One hand - Sism's left hand went directly to the bottle while the other continued to clutch the hand laser which was 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 that things were not about to get any better.

In all honesty, this misery would welcome some company, but the benevolent hand which brushed 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 the 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 that 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 is happening to you?"

Sism just realized that 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 which happened to be psychological in nature for the purposes of revving up his lower body for the quick escape. Anxious was not the word that even he could use to maybe describe himself because the powerful piston-like movement which centered 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 that we shouldn't have done that 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 sensible sentences together let alone behave rationally. "I'm sure that 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 that everybody is safe - okay? I should get you back home."

Sism 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 Sism 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 that 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 which was emanating from around the nape of the neck!

This was not a situation of Sism resting peacefully on the bar top. He had tried to get his arms up in order to assess the instantaneous damage of a sniper's bullet which 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 Sism 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 which was being displayed on the console within his fighter that happened to be 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 which his weapon was obviously paired with as it instanced the exact positions of Sism and Sooty plus lethal aiming points throughout their bodies - through walls. He even had to admit that 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 that the hovering fighters were away from Humpsman Bar, the possibly changing positioning of the former targets, subtle variances in his circulatory and respiratory functions which would cause exponential inaccuracy, and any number of other atmospheric shifts that could come about from sniping at two miles worth of distance; it was extremely powerful, and its very use meant that 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 have needed one if my target, Sooty, had been left to me. Ah well - not like even we could've known that 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 that Sism and Sooty did hook up though because, unrelated, I've been meaning to send the Palatine Triad a message, and 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 which will keep them occupied for a while."

"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 that 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 unsureness from his unit, Pete suggested that, "From here on out, everything regarding the Enforcers needs to stay within this room. The moment that they catch on to 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 which we could even bring to the fray."

With a smile, Julian stated, "I probably shouldn't admit this, but you know that 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, "that if you see a good fight, you should 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 would not belong to you. And you wouldn't 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 of that 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 of 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, and for the Enforcers, Yori - codenamed 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 of the existence of the Enforcers earlier, but nobody did - no one was aware of the presence of this lethal black ops unit which he belonged to. Sure, everybody could imagine that 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 that 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 that 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 tradeoff for finding good help. The person who ran 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 that the infrastructure and systems were 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 and gadgetry, and the internet was fast. This was all that anybody could ever ask for, so in many respects, he was a hero - the one person outside leadership throughout the base who 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 that 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 that 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 that he sat behind a DMZ which even the Space Force did not have access into. The Enforcers were that exclusive of a group. Tight-knit to the tune of suffocation as a direct

result of the stranglehold which they possessed on secrecy, there was not only no hope of his cover being blown but no chance.

A separated minicomputer, which looked like it originated from Enforcer combat gear, sat out on top of 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 Sec's 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 which 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 a simple planting of the 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 happened to be in the area and took care of things, so any offer of Sec's assistance would have been turned away through jurisdictional override. It was something that 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 which caused Autopsy to have to get creative in devising a story as to why so and so was no longer alive or why 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 that 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 that was a heart attack. Sometimes, people - especially martial artists just trained too intensely. Maybe there were some supplements which were 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 which needed to be tied 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 that you came back to Second Earth to see me."

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

Karyn could tell that this admission was difficult for Terry to make as her man was not used to opening up for many others outside of her, and he was having a tough time at doing that. "I would quit this job for you, but I've no qualms with running through my vacation and sick time in the interim. You already know

this: Head doctors are only required for specialized procedures and staff meetings. And nobody likes staff meetings, so with no pending procedures which require 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 which showed some teeth, "I feel like I'm proposing to you."

"You're not?" Karyn said playfully and slyly in the portrayal of her surprise which happened to be 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 that 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 that Karyn could say, but it went without saying because she was honestly stunned. Her heart was a flutter with an increased anticipation which cradled 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 that 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 that 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 that I could think about was getting things in a position of where I could finally and legitimately be with you.

I had 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 which I made forced me to have to reevaluate my status - my worth. And I know that 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, "that I've become a better person because I need to exceed your wildest expectations."

"There's so much that 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 that 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 that whatever you're harboring shouldn't, but even if both sets managed to somehow creep up - which I can't imagine that they would, our love is strong enough to survive.

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 this relationship," she initiated the kissing before pulling away to finish her thought, "so please know that I too have

done some soul-searching in order to become a better-rounded person who would 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 that 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, beeping emanated from Karyn's purse which was 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 which was causing them to put some much needed distance between the workplace and the attraction of their yearning loins.

With the distinct sound that 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 who he was, his curiosity got the better of him when he asked, "What is that? It's 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 a veil of secrecy.

Sometimes, 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 that 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 that it was nothing, I would be lying. And I'd be a fool to mouth something so uncharacteristically false when I knew that the situation was nothing less than dire or severe. Are you sure that you still want me?"

Squeezing Terry's arm as if to usher him out of her office, Karyn made clear, "Tell me when you can. Since our love is not 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 that I know about you is that you love me too - 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 that 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 both of us. 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 which I finally now

have with you worrying about what is 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 that this would become an asset in the future but also knew that 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 an impact or even a tiny dent in the tidal wave of despair which he was forecasting, their contribution would be most welcome.

"As have you," Karyn appreciated Terry's continued willingness to confide what little that 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 which told her what she needed to know. He was genuinely afraid - of what, she knew not. It terrified her in a sense that the details would not be discussed for some time, but at the end of the day, this head doctor was an Enforcer, and 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 that 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 that the ultimate truth as the Enforcers saw things would be introduced into the feed which would eventually reach Sec's dispatcher console. More of a strategic foothold over their enemies could be gained with this method of leveraging the actions of the Police Force.

Last on Autopsy's list were a pair of kills which could be blamed on the underworld court that happened to be 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 that mattered to a public who was unconcerned by details. As long as there was a sense that the Police Force was on the trail of some bad people which was technically indistinguishable from them chasing their own tail, the public was satisfied. Never mind the fact that 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 which was associated with them, so what they actually managed to be taken down for would usually become irrelevant in the scheme of things. And that 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.

And sometimes, 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 that 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 which happened to be of greater significance than petty organized crime - namely the Doran Aristocracy and the remainder of the converted Shokan.

The Brael Moonbeam

"It's odd that 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 the 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 that 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 that rears 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 of his surrogate grandparents murdered, but this man who stood 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 and Charlene 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 that 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 of 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 who happened to be 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 that Billy was used to showing because of the atrocities which had been 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 person who was ailing. 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 that something was just not right.

As if netting a long sought after 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 which was immobilizing his right arm within it. Billy was strong in giving him the injury but merciful in not going any further with things outside of the hyperextension. Running his left hand across the injured appendage caused him to wonder aloud, "What is 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 as to why I can even admit that fact to you," Sylvia explained, "is because the Aristocracy happens to be the one sect of Dorans which tends to veer away from forcibly bending their people to its will. As with any culture, that is 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 which happens to be 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 outside of blind allegiance was the emergence of Glove coming from out of 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, and the both of them continued on while Sylvia stood, watching on - hoping for Billy's sake that 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 that 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 that 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 of 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 which caused 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 have always been one of my most loyal Shokan."

"Of course, Master," Sanjuana felt that 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 are not 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 which you fill within the Shokan, then that is 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 of 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 disappointingly of his continuing 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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