

Federal Colonial Planet of Awarn; High Orbit

T+5 hours

632.8 Kilometers from ground zero

Commander Anton Sykes was the first to know when, as he awoke, he realized that the face of the planet greeting him from outside his window *wasn't* the scarred, de-urbanized surface of earth.

Him and his team had been moved.

It took him a moment to recognize the planet that their ship was orbiting as Awarn, one of the older, though more obscure colonies. He'd never visited, since officially, PeraTek didn't own any facilities there.

All the same, it had been years since Sykes had last set foot on the planet. It was where all the worst secrets were kept in the sparsely-populated, unsettled regions, and as a bioresearch firm PeraTek was no exception.

Sure enough, the orders in Sykes' inbox confirmed his suspicions— touch down, perform triage on the condition of corporate infrastructure, and ensure that any records were in “presentable” condition.

Saving lives wasn't even in the job description, just a side effect that made the job remotely bearable to Sykes. Still, there were small comforts— Corporate always waited until 8 AM to give out instructions, even if it wasn't an intentional kindness. The Internal Affairs bureaucrats back on earth had their schedule, and he had the pleasure of *a/so* having theirs.

Retrieving a nutritionally complete extruded “cereal” bar from his station's kitchen, Sykes went around to rouse his subordinates.

His first visit was to his longest-standing squadmember, Tinashe. Sykes knocked twice on her quarters' sliding metal door before opening it.

“Hey.”

When it wasn't hidden by her helmet, Tinashe kept her hair in two puffball pigtails using plastic beads whose colors changed with the day of the week. Everybody in the squad upheld an identity when they weren't a PeraTek corporate mercenary, and as a certified electrician already, Tinashe was in a welding trade school. The workbench in the corner of her room that seemed half-drowned in little scraps of metal was evidence enough of this.

She squinted at him groggily from her plushie-ridden bed. “Again?”

“Gotta earn your keep somehow.”

Tinashe didn't need any more instruction than that. Across from her bedroom was that of Sykes' machine gunner, Daniels.

It was full of plants. Cluttering shelves, desks, tables, and the floor were rows and rows of potted plants: vines, herbs, shrubs, flowers, grasses, and several bonzais competed bitterly with one another for what little volume they could choke out of the room, spilling out from their containers and overflowing down the sides.

It would have been a pleasant room to be in. Save for one corner that Sykes *really* tried to avoid looking at.

Where, on a dog bed whose nametag read “Angie”, under a pile of photographs and candles and polymer spent casings and dried flower petals and little bits of chocolate and other things was an HC-407 heavy machine gun in the 7.5x25mm cartridge.

Sykes... tried not to think about Daniels' relationship with his Angie. Daniels was a good machine gunner. He was a reliable machine gunner. Daniels was exceptionally trustworthy as far as it came to pointing his machine gun at people and killing them, and that was what Sykes needed Daniels to do. There'd been twenty seven marks added to Angie's stock ever since he was transferred to Sykes.

The gunner was nowhere to be seen in his absolute jungle of a bedroom.

“Danny, you in here?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Orders came in.”

“Mmhmm.”

Sykes figured it would be best if he left at that. He really *didn't* want to recognize something unpleasant in Angie's shrine.

Going down the hall, Sykes knocked at the next door, prompting a “One moment!” from the occupant inside.

Seconds later, it slid open, revealing a red-haired young woman in an undershirt and fatigue pants. The room behind her was entirely unfurnished, save for a multitude of suitcases and boxes stacked in the corners.

She saluted. “Commander Sykes.”

Sheridan was a newcomer to the squad. She'd been a mercenary before PeraTek had poached her, and as far as Sykes could tell, made for a good soldier.

"Orders came in. We're suiting up and making planetfall, I'll fill you in after breakfast."

Sykes continued to the final room, which housed yet another newcomer.

This one was spartan in its own way; furnished, though in an ascetic, moderate fashion. Hanging above the bed were the room's only decorations: a policeman's badge, a case of service medals, and a curved leather sheath belonging to a machete-like blade that Sykes learned was called a Jile.

The blade's owner was already awake. He sat crosslegged on his bed, shirtless, and held his Jile, drawing it over a whetstone in a purposeful, meditative rhythm.

The planet that Sandersfeld hailed from had a sizable East African diaspora. He was quite a lot of things that Sheridan wasn't: a sunbeaten, darkskinned, sinewy man, curly-haired man who existed comfortably without proving his worth. His hair and close beard was speckled with flakes of gray.

"Orders came in."

Sandersfeld drew his blade over the whetstone again. Slowly. Gently. It sang in his careful hands.

"Sandersfeld, you heard?"

He nodded. "Loud and clear, commander. I'll be with you soon."

Sykes closed the door. Sandersfeld had probably done and gone about as many things as Sykes did, though they'd never gotten an opportunity to share stories in great detail. His career was exactly as could be inferred: he was a soldier, and he'd been a police officer, and now he was a corporate mercenary. In fact, that only item of note on Sandersfeld's file was that he *did* own property down on Awarn.

Sykes wondered if he'd ever find out what, if any secrets that the veteran kept on the planet.

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

Federal Colonial Planet of Awarn; Northern Arctic Circle

T+3 days after incident

5.5 Kilometers from ground zero

The snow reached up to Mirza's shins.

He had to trudge through it, pushing against the soft powder as it pushed back at him, through the layers of snow pants he wore, challenging him for each and every step.

The wind picked up. Mirza's legs were tired. It was coming down thick. He kept pushing.

Indifferent to the passage of time, Mirza moved south, against the wind, foot after foot over the rolling hills and rocky outcroppings, until a distant shape began to resolve itself against the blizzard.

The silhouette of a lone figure. Headed his way.

Mirza redoubled his efforts towards the individual, gait taking on the odd skip-waddle necessary to run through snow, as the stranger became clearer and clearer through the blizzard.

They wore a matching set of anorak and snowpants, both made of navy-blue canvas, a tactical vest, slung with shotgun shell bandoliers, and a tinted, single-filtered gas mask.

Hanging from a single-point sling on their chest was a combat shotgun, and they not-so-subtly grabbed it in such a way that it could be swung up to point at Mirza in an instant.

The figure waved at Mirza. "Hey there." The voice was a man's. His accent seemed distinct.

"Hey," Mirza panted. "Friend. Listen. You must help me. I need to get out of here."

Mirza kept approaching, slowing down to catch his breath as he drew near, and froze dead in his tracks at four paces away.

The barrel of the shotgun had swung up to point level at Mirza's chest. He froze there, uncomfortably midstride, unsure of what to do as his breaths condensed in the frozen air. Finally, he took a step backwards.

"Mm, sure," the figure hummed. Only then was the shotgun lowered— slowly, so it could be jerked back upward in an instant. "Say, you don't mind I call my squad over, do you?"

The question was entirely rhetorical: before Mirza could answer, he reached his left hand across his chest and depressed the push-to-talk on a small radio. "Got a survivor at my position, male, PeraTek parka. Lad seems a little *stray*."

There was a connotation Mirza distinctly didn't like in that last word. Stray. Like a wandering dog.

"I-I think I don't think that's necessary," he objected. "I should keep going. It's getting cold."

"Nah, mate. You ought to stay right here." He spoke casually, in a chipper tone, even as the shotgun's barrel was once again pointed Mirza's chest. He gestured with it, pointing the weapon's barrel to a snowbank behind him. "Sit down in the snow over there, won't you? Facing away from me."

A million possibilities raced through Mirza's mind as he hesitated. There weren't any insignia or badges on the man's uniform to imply an affiliation, but he had to have been here on some group's behalf. Should Mirza try his luck in a confrontation? Run? Beg? Bargain?

"I asked you nicely the first time, mate. I won't. Do it. Again. Go sit down in that snowbank, now."

That was all the motivation Mirza needed. He placed his hands on the back of his head, even though he hadn't been asked to do so, and trudged over to the section of powder snow that had been pointed to.

This close to the ground, the winds that skipped across the ground picked up loose snow and threw it in a constant current.

"We've got a few minutes," the figure announced. Snow crunched behind Mirza, but he didn't dare turn around to see why. "So, mate: won't you tell me what led up to you wandering around out here on your lonesome?"

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+3 days

6 Kilometers from ground zero

The PeraTek Response Team operators rode in on two per a snowmobile.

They drove in silence, navigating by the holographic waypoints projected across the interiors of their helmets. Whoever they were in their personal lives, wherever they'd come from, they were now PeraTek Incident Response Operators.

Only trace elements of their personhood lingered in the suits. Sykes, as lead element, bore a second pair of radio antennae on his helmet. Tinashe's tactical vest was filled with tools, including a cutting torch, and to make room she carried a reduced-power carbine. Daniels,

whose suit was up-armored with additional plates, carried the opposite burden of pouches upon pouches of ammunition. Sandersfeld's loadout was entirely standard issue, save for his sheathed Jile, whose wooden and leather construction seemed out of place against the titanium and hyperceramic construction of the armor it was strapped to. Sheridan's was standard issue. This said more about her than any artifacts could have.

Their enclosed armor suits bore the charcoal and green heraldry of the PeraTek colors, and all together they looked not unlike spacemen who'd been snatched from some derelict station and mistakenly placed into an arctic environment.

It wasn't far from the truth that they were. PeraTek didn't own many planetside facilities. Still, the security operator's equipment served them no worse in the subzero temperatures than it did the hard vacuum of space.

They tore across the open ice, leaving plumes of snow in their wake as the counter imposed on their vision ticked lower and lower.

Sheridan was the first to break the silence as they passed the 1 kilometer mark. "What's the intel we have on our first point of interest, commander?"

It took Sykes a moment to recall the contents of the docket he'd skimmed half an hour earlier. "It's a filling station, number thirteen in the installation PeraTek built, and serves as a fuel depot and emergency shelter. Some time ago, the structure's distress beacon was activated, and it's on the way to the primary facility."

"Mhm." She nodded in Sykes' rearview mirror. "What's the threat profile look like?"

They were 200 meters out and coming up on the crest of a hill.

Sykes held an arm up to indicate he'd be braking. "Slow down, everyone."

The five engines driving the snowmobile's power quietened to an idle purr as they rolled to a stop.

The weather overhead was clear, allowing the sun to shine with total unobstruction on the valley below, producing an almost noxious amount of glare. Midway down the slope was a small building with broken windows, painted black to contrast with the brazen shine of the snow. Footsteps in winding paths pocked the ground.

Sykes dismounted and turned to address his squadron. "The truth is, we don't have the clearance to know what kinds of threats might have gotten into the area. Even still, this is Awarn and the nearby facility was a bioresearch one. I want all of you to stay frosty on the approach. Pair up and safeties off. Call out anything you see."

A soft murmur of discussion rose from Sykes' squad. Each and every one of them was an experienced combatant. "We won't tell you" from higher up the chain of the command always, *always* meant "assume the worst."

The rest of the trip up to the structure passed in total silence, on foot, in case the engines of the snowmobiles alerted anything within

The building, now that they were closer, was a laser-cut prefab with two fuel tanks out front, and a fine coating of powder snow obfuscated the several sets of footprints that led into it. Three of the four windows were shattered, but none had broken glass on the floor outside of it, and a toppled-over barricade of furniture took up the doorway. There were dribbles of blood in the snow and on the shards of glass still clinging to the window frames.

"Casualty!" Tinashe announced, pointing to a scorched divet in the ground, "by the tanks!"

Sykes walked up to the small ditch, whose edges were lined with glossy black ice. At its bottom, an inch deep in refrozen ice, was a charred and snow-dusted body still clutching the remnants of a steel jerrycan.

"Seems like it. We can take a closer look once the building's secure." Sykes nodded to himself, then turned to address the group. "Daniels, Sandersfeld, sweep the building. Tinashe and I will camp at the entryway, Sheridan, you're out front."

Following an all clear from within, Sykes stepped into the fill station. Each sported a cookie-cutter design: a single, large break room on the first floor and a stairwell leading to a storage, sanitary, and bunkroom underground.

The scene that Sykes stood in the middle of as he surveyed it was a mess. All of the furniture, including a couch, pool table, and vending machine had been pushed up against the broken-*in* windows, barricading them and leaving the common room's floor almost entirely empty. Glass shards, shotgun hulls burnt flares, food wrappers, used medical supplies, and steel pistol casings littered the ground, as did splatterings of blood.

A dense, person-sized bloodstain dominated the center of the center. There'd been some kind of a stand here, but no bodies of any sort suggested what kind.

Sykes crouched down to pick up one of the pistol casings, rolling between his finger and thumb until the text on the headstamp was right side up. He already knew what the marking was going to say— Kestrel Industries; 10mm Auto— but protocol was protocol. PeraTek only ever bought their ammunition from a single supplier. Bullet casings without the markings were always oddities in Sykes' line of work; concealed carry weapons, or worse, signs of outside interference.

Sykes was broken from his reverie as Daniels, shadowed by Sandersfeld, came up the steel staircase leading downstairs. The machine gunner gestured with a thumb over his shoulder.

“Boss, we found another body. It’s handcuffed to one of the beds, badly chewed up. PID on it says ‘Mirza Sohrab.’”

T+6 hours **3 Kilometers from ground zero**

The shotgun in Mirza’s hands had a flare in it.

Not a flare shell. A *flare*. It had been lit and stuffed partway down the barrel of the firearm in an attempt to make it still seem dangerous. They’d run out of shotgun shells twenty minutes ago, but the sight of the wood-furnished firearm still seemed to strike fear into the things outside. For now.

It wasn’t even Mirza’s idea. The honor belonged to Kewryn, but Kewryn was face-up in the center of the room in a pool of his own slowly-freezing blood, so so the exact attribution didn’t really matter at the moment.

Certainly not when the sound of yipping once again rang out from the darkness outside. Disturbed from their uneasy rest, the remaining survivors wearily rose and glanced through the barricaded windows. They totaled five in the fillstation.

Six, counting Mariam, who’d stammered about feeling something, wobbled outside, and doused herself in hydrocarbons before striking a flare. She was still burning a small hole into the snow outside, casting an orange light onto the snow.

Kewryn, who’d stopped moving, had been a repair technician.

Stela and Cyrus, both members of the research team, each held a spear fashioned from pool cues they found in the break room. The one in Cyrus’ hands was headed by a shard of glass, lashed down, and he wore a dress shirt that peeked out from beneath a nomex jacket. Stela wore several labcoats for warmth, each atop the other, and her spear’s split shaft held the detached blade of Emil’s combat knife.

She’d practiced HEMA in graduate school. Nobody else had.

On Mirza’s other side was Emil, a containment officer. He’d been changing in the containment wing lockers when containment failed, supposedly, and wore a partial set of Containment Officer’s polycarbonate armor to show for it. He looked not unlike a riot officer, clad in black plates of armor over a white jumpsuit, but more heavily protected, bearing slash

protectors around his wrists, neck, and ankles. On Emil's helmet was a large visor, which always seemed to have fog on it, no matter what, and there was only a single pistol magazine left in his vest.

The yipping had stopped. Shapes moved outside, just beyond the radius of the light that spilled through the window, crunching snow underfoot as they gathered around the window Mirza guarded. He pointed the weapon's barrel outside the window, casting a deep red light into the night.

"BANG!" he shouted. His voice wasn't as sure as he thought it was going to be.

Several pairs of beady, curious eyes studied him from just within the flare's radius of illumination. They were some kind of canine, Mirza realized. His gaze met with one of the animals' for just an instant too long, and it tilted its head at him, eye contact locked, and lunged forwards.

Mirza jumped backwards, pulling himself back through the window as it leapt up at the threshold. He jabbed awkwardly with the weapon's barrel, burning end of the flare deflecting off the animal's snout and landing squarely in its eye.

It bub for an instant that lasted far too long.

The creature yelped and drew back as a second snout came out of the darkness and snapped at the perceived threat of the flare, biting down, and it was pulled from the shotgun's barrel as Mirza yanked on the weapon, desperate not to lose it.

A third dog pressed forwards, snapping at the hated barrel of the retreating shotgun and just barely missing as its jaws closed on empty air. Mirza, seeing the animal overextend, surged forwards, swinging the weapon around his hands to hold it by the barrel barrel and continuing the motion as he brought the weapon's stock down onto the canine's skull in a vicious arc.

Forced throat-first into the jagged glass lining the windowsill, the animal let out shortened, wet yelp as several shards bit deep into its neck. It struggled as it bled, not yet dead but soon to be, as it a fourth came over the ramp its squirming body provided and into the fillstation proper.

It snapped at him once, a bite Mirza narrowly avoided, then a second time, teeth clamping around his ankle as it bit down and shook until the point of Stella's spearhead closed the distance and lanced into its jugular. She pulled the spear free, arcing the weapon with a unique, kinematic precision, and plunged the weapon behind its shoulder blade, between its ribs, and deeper into the animal's heart and lungs.

It growled with fading vitriol as he bashed at it with the shotgun's buttstock, attempting to dislodge the animal, just as a fifth dog appeared in the window. It studied the fray for an instant, then leapt down, and never contacted the floor before being sniped mid-air by a wooden chair thrown by Cyrus.

By the time the sixth dog was looking ready to enter, Emil had finally unholstered his PeraTech 10mm sidearm and let fly five bullets into its center mass, sending the pack outside startling a little further backwards into the darkness with each gunshot.

Mirza's ears rang as he watched Stella finish off the dog that had been hit by the chair as Cyrus watched them retreat from the window and Emil reloaded. He wasn't sure what, if anything, he was meant to be doing.

Finished with her task, Stela gestured towards the bite mark on Mirza's ankle with her spear.

"That's a mean looking wound."

"Oh." His ankle had been bitten. Mirza had forgotten about that. He glanced down, studying where his snowpants had been tattered by the animal's jaws, obfuscating the damage to the tissue below. Small splotches of crimson soaked the fabric. "I think I'll be fine. Thank you for your concern. It's not nearly as bad as it might seem."

Emil, across the room, hadn't moved from his crouching position over one of the dead animals. Slowly, he stood, then nudged the dead canine with his foot in demonstration.

Emil's eyes flickered between the three other survivors as he held his pistol pointed down in two hands. "Does everyone know what these things are?"

It looked similar to a husky or german shepherd, though had an enlarged, lengthened snout with bulging jaw muscles, and its whole body was covered with mats of pinkish-white fur. The animal had two sets of ears, totalling four, and its eyes seemed distinctly human.

Mirza didn't.

T+3 days

5.5 Kilometers from ground zero

Mirza was still sitting in the snowbank he'd been instructed to by the strange man. His legs were starting to get uncomfortable, and snow was accumulating on them, so he shifted. The man with the combat shotgun had never said that he couldn't shift.

"I-I don't know," he admitted.

"You don't know, mate?" There was a sheer, gloating amusement in his voice. He'd been hoping for that answer. "You don't know how you've ended up in the fucking arctic circle, on foot, fifty clicks out from the nearest settlement? Haven't got the slightest bloody clue?"

"Can I please turn around? This is degrading."

"Not with those kinds of answers," he quipped.

There and then, Mirza decided he didn't like this guy. *Personally*. Not just the suspicious circumstances around his presence.

"Fine. I was at the PeraTek research facility. May I please turn around now?"

"And exactly *what* were you doing at PeraTek? Visiting for a turkey dinner, were you, mate?"

Mirza didn't answer.

The man chortled, amused, just as a short two-beep squawked from his radio. He went silent as a tiny, unintelligible voice spoke from his earpiece. "Ah, shit. Seems like you've been saved by the bell. My mates are here."

Mirza counted twelve breaths until an approaching pair of footsteps was audible, then another fifty until they stopped behind him.

"Mrs. Artier."

"Dodson," a young woman's voice spoke.

"Where's the animal control van, ma'am?"

"Dodson, we don't have one." She paused for a short breath. "There aren't any *roads* out here for the van to drive in on."

"Oh. Right. Well then, that's a right shame."

The snow behind Mirza crunched as someone—likely Dodson—took several steps towards Mirza. There was the minute click of a weapon being taken off safe. He tensed up in anticipation.

"Dodson." The sound stopped, confirming their origin. "This is my operation. Your orders were to wait here and do *nothing* until I say do. Was I clear?"

“Yes. Crystal, ma’am.”

“Then get back here and watch my six.” Dodson’s footsteps retraced their route. “You, in the green jacket, stand up and turn around.”

Mirza, who’d resigned himself to an eavesdropper in the exchange, looked around in the off chance there was anyone else a PeraTek parka before realizing he was being addressed. He rose and turned on two tired legs.

The woman— Artier— was dressed similarly to Dodson, wearing a jacket and snowpants that were both navy canvas, but seemed much less equipped like a soldier. She wore no gas mask— just ski goggles and a facewrap, and had neither shotgun nor tactical vest, either. Instead, at her hip, sat two magazine pouches and a bulky-looking pistol in an equally large holster at her hip.

She took a step towards Mirza. “Your name?”

“Ma’am,” Dodson objected.

“Mirza Sohrab.”

“Are you a federal citizen, Mirza?” She continued her approach. The man behind her shifted anxiously.

“*Ma’am*,” He objected, again, a little more urgently this time.

The woman— Artier— finally whirled around to face Dodson. “Do you have something you’d like to say?”

He just tilted his head towards Mirza and coughed.

“Fine.” Sighing, she turned back to Mirza and produced a syringe from one of her pockets. “Would you consent to a blood test, Mr. Sohrab?”

The woman flicked off the implement’s safety cap, and in that moment, walked within arm’s reach of Mirza.

T+17 hours
3 Kilometers from ground zero

Sykes was down a Response Specialist.

His finger bobbed as he counted the suited mercenaries in front of him— Tinashe , Daniels and Sheridan— and ultimately concluded Sandersfeld was missing.

“Daniels, where’s your buddy?”

“Still downstairs. He said he wanted to stay and investigate the body.”

“Well, leave him to it.” Sykes nodded in approval. Sandersfelds’ record listed a career in law enforcement. “In the meantime, keep searching for casualties and any firearms these casings were shot from. I’m going to take a look at the charple outside.”

Leaving it at that, Sykes’ visor dimmed briefly as it overadjusted to compensate for the sheer level of glare. The “charple”— a colloquialism tracing its roots to a 3D model of a burnt corpse— lay face-up in a shallow, icy, soot-lined pit, same as it had when they’d arrived.

There wouldn’t be much information Sykes could glean from the cadaver. Perhaps Sandersfeld could— he made a mental note to have him come up and take a look at it— but forensics wasn’t why he was here.

It was the body itself. Cadavers were almost always moved if they could be, save for urgent circumstances. A few were certainly removed from the fill station— there’d be more to show for the sheer level of blood otherwise— and so the question remained why the hell *this* one hadn’t.

The soot-marred ice that the body lay submerged an inch within was one possible answer, but it would’ve been liquid long after the fire died. Unless it belonged to a loner. Sykes doubted that.

The ruptured, flame-rusted jerrycan it clutched offered a second possibility. Suicide— an abandoned casualty? That could’ve explained the second cadaver in the basement if the fillstation had been used as a camp, but absolutely not a stronghold.

“Commander.”

Sykes jumped and nearly put a quartet of 5-milimeter pulse bolts through the man who appeared behind him. Not that he’d been caught off guard, of course. “Sandersfeld!” he announced, betraying nothing but bravado. “Don’t ever sneak up on me again. What’ve you found out about the stiff downstairs?”

“A former containment specialist, or someone got ahold of one’s uniform. Male, mid-thirties, signs of a struggle, most likely mauled to death. Badly chewed up anywhere that wasn’t covered by armor. Heavy bruising, especially around the knuckles. He lost a scuffle beforehand.”

“Murder?”

"Manslaughter, probably," Sandersfeld corrected. "Helluva way to kill someone on purpose," he added.

"Mhm." The differences between the two were largely lost on Sykes. "What do you make of this body?"

Sandersfeld's head turned to the divot in the snow in front of them, and he crouched down, studying the body below. After a minute of silence, his hands came up to his head, gloved thumbs pressing in on the releases at either side of the helmet. With a muted click, the lock disengaged.

Sandersfeld was a man of primarily Ethiopian descent— a heritage evident in his complexion, though not name— and he squatted on the balls of his feet to study the corpse, helmet pinned in the crook of his elbow. With his other hand, he drew a foot-long, curved blade from an elaborate wooden sheath in the small of his back: a Jile knife. Sandersfeld prodded the body's upper arm with the blade's point, causing flakes of carbon to chunk off.

"Female," he hesitated, "If I had to guess. All the moisture was cooked out of the body, but it's an incomplete burn. Some kind of accelerant was used."

"Accelerant?"

"Mhm." Sandersfeld sniffed the frozen air once, then twice. He exhaled, letting his breath form into a plume of vapour that danced in front of his face, dispersing slowly. He wiped his face with the blue-gray armored plate on his forearm, then put his helmet back on. "Doused herself in chemfuel. Motivated suicide. Tried to take someone or something with her."

It was an awful lot of analysis to draw from a half-burnt body. Sykes raised an eyebrow, if only in the privacy of his own helmet. "What makes you so sure, Sandersfeld?"

"Seen it before." Sandersfeld continued squatting, but craned his neck to glance up at Sykes. The copper-green visor enclosing his face betrayed absolutely no emotion. Not that the veteran's bare face would have been much more expressive. Incendiary grenades were common fare when the bugs would— Sykes." Sandersfeld abruptly stood up. "Up on the hill."

Sykes turned around, tracing Sandersfeld's finger to a hilltop nearby.

Standing at its peak, silhouetted atop against the blue, empty arctic sky, was a single, pinkish-white, four-eared canine.

"Oh, fuck's sake," Sykes gently swore, unslinging his carbine and flicking the safety off. He strode back towards the fillstation, careful not to break into run. After watching for a moment's worth of confusion, Sandersfeld followed. "EVERYONE IN. SAFETIES OFF."

Tinashe, who'd been working at the fill station's wall console, glanced over her shoulder to face her commander. "What's out there, boss?"

T+6 hours

3 Kilometers from ground zero

"Specimen dogs," Emil announced. "These things are specimen dogs."

Mirza hadn't heard of such a thing before. He shared a glance with Cyrus, who seemed equally confused.

Stella stepped forwards. "They're bred to track down several pheromones common to the specimens we research. Certain diet additives we fed them, too, um. They're aggressive and they follow scent."

"Scent," Emil echoed. He seemed content with that word, letting it settle as he paced, hand resting on the grip of his pistol. "They track escaped freaks down by scent. So why the fuck's a pack of them outside trying to kill us? Anyone wanna fess up?"

The flares they'd been using for light crackled gently on the ground. Nobody stepped forward with a confession.

"Even if we throw someone to the wolves and it works, we'd be down a fighting body," Stella softly concluded. "There's other things out there. I saw what got Kewryn. It had chitin."

"Gee, ain't that a relief?" Emil retorted. He was starting to get mad—the condensation on his visor grew steadily with every breath. "That it's a free-for-all out there and we got *every* side gunning for us, not just a few? If we didn't have to worry about *those* fuckin' things, I'd have three mags, Mirza'd have fifteen shotgun shells, and god, who knows, maybe Mariam would've actually kept her shit together."

Cyrus, who'd been studying Emil the full conversation, pressed his eyebrows together. "Hey, you were in the containment wing when it went down, right? And you were really in a rush to put the armor on. You told us that."

Emil stopped pacing. His visor had almost fully fogged up by now, but the glare behind it was as evident as ever. "Just what the fuck are you trying to imply, Cyrus?"

Cyrus just looked at Emil and said nothing. Concern was plain on his face.

"IDs out," Emil snapped. Nobody dared to move. He ripped his sidearm out of the holster. "EVERYONE GET YOUR FUCKING ID CARDS OUT. NOW."

Stella went first, producing a lanyard from beneath the layered labcoats she wore for warmth. The stripes on hers were three purple ones, signifying her as a high-ranking researcher.

"I'm a delivery driver," Mirza stated as he produced a loose card, emblazoned with a yellow and black stripe. He held it around, showing that yes, it displayed his portrait, and quickly returned it to his pocket.

Cyrus went next, displaying a wallet with a transparent card pouch, also purple striped.

Everyone turned to stare expectantly at Emil, who still held his pistol in two hands. "I'm Emile Severin," he announced, "a containment officer. My employee code is 20258-C."

The three other survivors watched, expectantly, for Emil to produce an ID card verifying his rank and name. He didn't. Stella shifted her feet uncomfortably.

For the first time all conversation, Mirza spoke up. "Where's your identity card, Emil?"

"It's in my bag," he admitted. "In the containment wing changing room."

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+3 days

5.5 Kilometers from ground zero

Spooks

Mirza lunged.

And as he lunged, his right arm went down to his ankle, and as it came up, the metal point of a screwdriver glinted as it blurred towards the woman's neck.

The expression on the woman's face was totally oblivious.

And then it wasn't as she dipped to the side, weaving with speed that rivaled his own. She surged sideways, arriving at his exposed side just as the screwdriver sailed through the air where her neck had been just a moment before, and then lunged forwards with an assault of her own.

She fucking *decked* him.

A vicelike hand grabbed Mirza's wrist as he collapsed, preventing him from doing anything with the screwdriver. He kneeled there, feigning pain for a moment until the woman's attention seemed to fade, and then surged back up towards her, stabbing for where her kidneys were but only sinking the tool's metal point into the flesh of her thigh as she pulled away.

The woman delivered a second haymaker, this one with significantly more force than the last, that spattered the scuffed surface of snow beneath them with little flakes of red. She let go of Mirza's wrist, and it was unclear what she was doing for a moment before her snow-caked boot came rushing up to Mirza's head, finally delivering him to the ground.

She kicked him twice in the gut for good measure before shoving him into the snow in a facedown pin.

It was *not* the first rodeo of Senior Field Agent Artier.

Not would it be her last.

"Dodson," she commanded, "zipties."

Dodson, had been watching the melee from a safe distance away, shotgun pointed towards the detainee should it attempt to close towards him. This, for once, was what he was supposed to be doing.

He chuckled apprehensively as he approached, letting his shotgun fall to hang from its sling. "Right. Well. D'you suppose that was a yes or a no on the test, ma'am?"

Still, he handed Artier a pair of aramid composite zipties, of which he kept five hanging from a carabiner on his belt, and stepped back to a respectable-but-not-denouncable distance away to let her fasten them to the squirming prisoner.

As she finished with her task, Dodson gestured towards the electrical screwdriver that was still embedded into his superior's thigh.

"You, uh. Might want to do something about that, ma'am."

"Oh." Artier had forgotten about her injury. She glanced down, and after getting a firm grip around the tool's handle, yanked it out. A small trickle of blood soaked her snowpants

around the puncture that quickly stymied. She brushed the blood-saturated cloth, only achieving the result of wiping it around more. "I'll be fine. It's... uh... not as bad as it looks."

Still pinning Mirza down, she reached for the syringe and booklet of test paper that had fallen to the ground in the fight, placing them back into the vest pocket they'd initially been in.

Where it had come into contact with her blood-smudged glove, the test paper had gone from an off-white to a brilliant, fluorescent orange.

"Rrrrrright," drawled Dodson, very believably.

Pausing with her ziptying, Artier offered a glance that fully implied any questions were off the table.

"How come you've not put one in your buddy there? You know, if you're uncomfortable, or, uh..." His eyes darted to the still *slightly* smudged pouch that Artier had just deposited her kit into, then back to Mirza. "Or if you two know each other, I could-"

"I'm not a fucking *bleeding heart*, Dodson," the senior field agent snapped, pressing down on Mirza in emphasis, and who responded by struggling beneath her, attempting to free his nose and mouth from the snow. She pressed down harder.

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no, of *course* not. Ma'am, I wasn't, uh-" Dodson figured it would be best if he stopped talking and instead indulged the sudden and overwhelming urge he felt to fidget with his gas mask. The scene in front of him continued to play out. She was *really* pushing him into the snow. "Are, you, um. Going to let him stand up in that case, miss?"

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+17 hours

3 Kilometers from ground zero

Corporate Mercenaries

Daniels watched through the irons on his machine gun as the specimen dog at the top of the hill sniffed towards the fill station, then made slow, gradual steps down towards it. He had the bipod deployed on the overturned vending machine, and its stock felt natural against his shoulder. Angie was made for this, and he was made for Angie, and Angie was made for him. This was the intended order of things.

Two, then three, five, eight, eleven more dogs appeared at the top of the hill.

“Boss,” Daniels announced, a hint of breathiness in his voice. “They’re still coming.”

“Hold your fire until seventy meters, Danny. They’re PeraTek property,” Sykes stated coolly from the room’s center.

“Commander, if what you say is true, I doubt these animals are passing through,” Sheridan objected.

She and Tinashe each covered the flanks at either side of the building. Sandersfeld, who presumably had experience shooting into swarms of small animals as they charged, was off to Daniels’ side. Sykes stood in the room’s center as he watched his PDA, studying the dogs from the relative safety of his subordinates’ camera feeds.

He hummed in agreement. “Good point. Tinashe, you’ve got the quietest gun of all of us. Go put a bullet in the corpse downstairs. Full magazine if it twitches. Sheridan, Sandersfeld...”

Both of the newcomers turned away from their prospective windows to regard their commander. He hesitated.

“Stay up here with me.”

Outside, the pink dogs continued to crest over the hill in ever-increasing numbers. Among them was a staggering variation in size— many stood head and shoulders over the pack, while many more ran at the legs of their packmates. Most of the large ones bore injuries— burns, cuts, raw gunshots, missing legs and ratty patches of missing fur. Questions meandered through Daniels’ mind as he kept his sights on the lead element. What did all of the dogs eat? Where were they kept?

Tinashe’s footsteps faded as she went downstairs, just as the pack alpha cautiously crossed what Daniels’ rangefinder identified as the seventy-meter line.

Daniels supposed it didn’t matter anymore as Angie, in his hands, began singing.

He liked it when Angie sang. He *liked* it.

The first five 7.5x25mm rounds ripped straight into the pack's leader. Even on the lowest firerate, the animal barely had time to startle as gunshots walked from the base of its snout to its neck to its shoulders to its gut to its hind legs, one hitting the snow behind it, then into the dog behind.

The burst continued, tearing a 90-round path through the startled pack as Daniels sought to spread as much damage as possible through the swarm. With its leading animal dead, the pack immediately split— several of the dogs retreated, injured or spooked, while the rest rushed forward or peeled off to attack the sides. Several dogs fell dead on the spot, while others limped on broken bodies behind their retreating packmates.

The last of the polymer casings clattered against the vending machine's side, smoking slightly, as Sandersfeld, Sheridan, and Sykes, filling in for Tinashe, opened up next to him. Their weapons left yellow-green-white pulse trails that crackled and hissed in the arctic air— the projectiles themselves having landed long before the smoke's formation— though Daniels paid the show no mind as he directed his full attention to reloading.

Open the action. New box. Spool it. Feed the first round. Close the action. Rack Angie.

It took him less than a second, though that was all the time necessary for the dogs to circle around, out of his firing arc, and threaten the fillstation's open double doors.

They came broiling in, pouring over the pool table as water through a stream, and four directions of fire scythed through them as they did.

Angie sang again, filling Daniels' lap with a *warm* pile of smoking polymer as she did, and dozens of holes filled the closest dog and the one behind it and the one behind it.

There weren't many left, though the largest of the dogs Daniels had seen still rushed towards him, mouth open and full of sharp.

Daniels' hand darted forwards to between the machine gun's legs, where the shotgun sat, and it spat three fireballs out it's front, three steel casings out its side, and carved three chunks out of the animal that approached, killing it on the spot.

Only a single ear remained of its face, and the animal collapsed, sliding forwards on momentum and coming to a stop just before Daniels' splayed-out legs, leaving a slight smudge on the carpet. The charred, off-white polymer casings were just barely perceptible as a warmth on his thighs as they smoked, as did the end of Angie's barrel and her presently locked-open bolt.

While they'd seemed insurmountable when they first appeared, the dogs had been made short work of by automatic weapon fire.

Sandersfeld busied himself with putting a pulse bolt into each of the injured four-eared dogs in the room, sweeping his weapon's barrel between each one's head with drilled precision, while Sheridan, in the corner, seemed to be searching her pouches for a magazine she hadn't yet used. Tinashe's light footsteps came up the steel staircase as she cautiously surfaced, PDW held low, but ready, and she turned to her squad for report.

"All clear?"

Sandersfeld, the closest to her, silently nodded, then turned his carbine back to the dogs outside.

Sykes walked up to the corpse in front of Daniels, towering over the both of them as he inspected the corpse.

"No wonder why we couldn't find any other cadavers. Damn things 'clean up' after themselves; destroy any traces or evidence, even their own." He gave the cooling body a swift kick to punctuate his sentence. "Fucking mongrels. Bastards ate well. There goes the investigation."

Daniels, who'd still been sitting, relishing in the sensation of Angie's weight against his lap, stood up as Sykes' presence brought him back to reality. A small shower of casings bounced hollowly off the floor as he rose.

"Boss, what drew them here?"

Sykes laughed. "Good question." He walked to the doorway, paused to take aim at the burnt body outside, and fired.

The body barely seemed to move, and the pulse trail whorled as it dispersed in the open air, crackling gently in the otherwise totally silent atmosphere. Absolutely else nothing happened. The mercenaries looked on, confused, occasionally glancing between the body and their commander.

Sykes turned and shrugged.

“Well, neither of the bodies here were playing possum, so I have to admit: *absolutely* no clue.”

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle
T+6.4 hours
3 Kilometers from ground zero
Survivors

The conversation, as Mirza spectated it by flare light, had continued to deteriorate.

Emil, at some point, had holstered his pistol, but he'd since drawn it again. Stella had continued to argue impetus, especially since the discussion had gone on for so long, and Cyrus was all but confident it was Emil. Mariam, meanwhile, had burned down to just a flickering light in her recess, and tiny crystals of frost were developing on Kewryn.

Mirza thought he heard yipping from outside.

“Everyone, stop.”

Stella, who'd been talking, ignored him. “- all we know, it could be Kewry or Mariam, who're already dead, so-”

Mirza stood up. “Everyone, STOP.”

Three pairs of eyes, each tired and so many other things, turned expectantly to Mirza.

“It's me.”

“Don’t say that, we saw your ID,” Stella objected. He turned to meet her gaze as Stella spoke and she immediately broke eye contact, glancing off to the side. “You’re good.”

“Did we, though?” Emil held a gloved hand out, beckoning with his fingers, as beside him Cyrus seemed to tighten his grip on his spear. “Show it to me again.”

Mirza handed the card to Emil, who inspected it, then laughed ruefully. He slipped it into the breast pocket just beneath his polycarbonate breastplate, not showing it to anyone else.

“Yellow and black for truck drivers. For all the highways out here. You motherfucker.”

Stella frowned. She was still standing opposed to Emil. “Let me see.”

He let out a barking laugh. “Absolutely not.”

“Yellow and black is code for fucking *anyone* associated with research efforts who isn’t a technician or scientist. It means nothing until you show us the card. Let me see.”

“Fuck you, Stella.” Emil, it seemed, had never been more smug. “You already knew, didn’t you? That’s why you were so desperate to argue that a *freak* riding in with us wasn’t anything to be worried about. You were hoping to get on his good side. You bleeding fucking heart.”

Cyrus, who’d been watching the argument escalate, grew more and more nervous.

“I’m hoping to survive, you dumb fucking cretin,” Stella shot back. “Do you think those dogs are just going to throw in the towel and let us prance off if we give up one of our own? As long as they can smell a *molecule* of the pheromones, those things are aggressive.”

“That’s a stupid fucking strategy to “survive.”” Emil’s index and middle finger came up off the grip of his pistol as they formed air quotes around the word. He pointed to Mirza with his left hand. “Here’s what’s gonna happen: You, and anyone who wants to take their chances with a lying fucking who-knows-what “truck driver” from containment will give me my shit back, take *nothing* that doesn’t belong to them, and see how far they make it out *there*. Truthfully, I don’t give a shit as long as it doesn’t endanger me. I’m not gonna hunt anyone down, that’s some other poor fucker’s job. If it comes down to it, though, I like my chances in this shitty pump station all by myself, though.”

“Fine by me.” Stella handed her knife-tipped spear to Cyrus, who passed it along to Emil before then traded it for his glass-tipped one.

Mirza, meanwhile, kneeled down beside Kerwyn, and after a moment’s hesitation, began patting the technician’s pockets down. Technically, the spears were Kerwyn’s— first his idea, then his technical expertise. As was the shotgun, and the idea to put a flare in its barrel and use that to scare off the dogs.

In the left thigh pocket of Kerwyn’s heavy canvas work pants, Mirza found what he’d been desperately hoping for: four green shotgun shells. They felt cold and heavy in his hands; the faded brass caseheads glimmered by flarelight. Of everyone, Kerwyn seemed the most fated to survive the night— confident and resourceful and arriving with a shotgun slung around his back— then something nicked an artery in his armpit, and that was that.

Mirza racked the pump back, as Kerwyn had instructed him, and dropped a shell into the open chamber.

And then Mirza froze.

He turned to Emil, who’d been carefully watching him reload from across the room. “We can’t leave anymore. Give her the spear back.”

Emil blinked “What?”

“The dogs are coming back around. If we split up now, we’re all dead.”

“No they fucking aren-”

The rapidly approaching sounds of snow crunching cut over Emil’s voice, then a low growl.

The containment officer whirled around just in time to loose a 10 milimeter hollow point bullet that missed as a pinkish-white blur tore through the open window and tackled him to the ground.

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+3 days

4 Kilometers from ground zero

Spooks

A small part of Mirza wished for Dodson back.

The gas-masked man, for all of his dry sarcasm, hadn't demonstrated any personal hatred for Mirza in his actions.

The same couldn't be true for his current company. The Artier openly presented all the same threats that Dodson implied, with the addition of an even more openly presented disdain.

The snowstorm from earlier had died down, leaving the evening sun to hang low in the clouded sky. It was cold. Bitterly cold. The zipties pressed against the tattered PeraTek parka at Mirza's wrists as he struggled to keep the pace she wanted him at.

"Where are we going?"

"The lab," she answered, tersely. "Keep moving."

Mirza stopped. Some ways behind him, so did the woman's footsteps.

Were they with PeraTek? Stella had mentioned a corporate response team at some point, but this couldn't be it. These people seemed to represent their own interests.

"You can't make me go back there," Mirza stated. "I'm not going back."

"I am, and you are," she countered, "and you're going to show me around."

Mirza wasn't having this. She'd played her hand— he was *necessary* for their mission. He turned around and dropped to a kneel in the snow, daring her to do something about it. She sighed as she walked up to him, hand resting on the grip of her pistol. The mannerism reminded him of someone. It felt nice to rest his legs.

The woman slowed to a stop in front of Mirza. A cloud of her breath condensed in the air in a short, aggravated huff. "Get up."

Mirza just looked up at her. And then behind her, going so far as to lean in order to get a better view: in the waning light, sniffing the channel that had been carved over and across the bounding, snowy hills by their footsteps was a pink, four-eared dog. Then three more. Four, in total.

Mirza smiled to himself. What a fucking joke. He laughed, letting himself fall onto his back, arms still ziptied behind him. It *was* funny. Fucking hilarious. A punchline three full days in the making.

The woman seemed about ready to kick Mirza in the gut until she turned, around, and and quietly, under her breath, whispered, “fuck.”

“You know what those are, don’t you?”

Artier didn’t respond. She just took her snowgloves off, unholstered her pistol and half-jogged up to meet them. The animals seemed threatened by her approach, stopping in their tracks to bark and growl before breaking into a coordinated sprint.

Mirza sat up to better watch the spectacle.

The woman’s pistol barked sluggishly, echoing with the flatter report of a shotgun, and shot only six times before the slide locked back.

The first round hit the leftmost dog square in the chest, and the animal made no audible noises as it simply crumpled, skidding limp on the ground, dead.

The second hit the ground, and then a half-instant later, threw up a small, dense plume of snow and smoke every which way.

The third hit the leftmost dog again, which had rotated around, and it traveled through the animal’s gut, throwing out fur and bone as it exited, and detonated with a *POP* into a cloud of smoke against the ground behind it.

The fourth went high, sending up a burst of snow on the ground behind the dogs, and the fifth went low, clipping one’s ear and tumbling into another’s fore leg. The limb simply stopped working.

The sixth, and final bullet, slid into the pistol's chamber at a slow enough speed that Mirza could see, and then fired, and hit the stumbling dog at the top of its back. The animal's hind legs, too, stopped, as the round detonated and its flanks simply stopped existing.

And then the dog with the clipped ear reached Artier, and it pounced, and its pronounced jaws closed around Artier's throat.

She fell to the ground wordlessly as the second one reached her leg, teeth closing around her ankle. Mirza wondered if she had any smokes on her as she struggled, kicking the animal and only occasionally not having her boots deflect off its bony hindlegs.

Artier's hand came up to the neck of the dog whose jaws remained clamped around her throat, and Mirza couldn't quite tell what happened, but blood quickly began dribbling down her wrist. With that one hand, she lifted it up, both her and the animal's necks now stained crimson, and she threw the dog, which sailed, limbs not quite flailing and not quite ragdolling, until it landed heavy against the ground.

She sat up, and that same hand of hers came down across the dog on her leg's face, leaving four trailing lacerations on the animal. It leg go, driven temporarily aback by the sudden pain, and Artier surged forwards, pushing the animal back and pinning it to the ground.

Mirza couldn't see what happened, but after a moment, she cleaned herself with snow, stood up, walked back to retrieve her pistol, and then calmly inserted a fresh magazine.

The blood on Artier's front reached halfway down her jacket, poorly cleaned with snow as it may be, and the steadiness that she walked back with was inconsistent with the severity of her wound. The woman's right arm terminated in a wicked, 5-clawed hand. She paused to wipe lingering stands of fur into the snow before hiding the appendage beneath a glove.

Artier turned to Mirza.

"Get up. Let's keep moving."

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+18 hours

1.5 Kilometers from ground zero

Corporate Mercenaries

Sykes raised his left arm out and up, signalling to the drivers behind him that he'd be slowing down. The snowmobile's engine pattered down to idling, and he cut it, then stood up.

Sheridan, as she approached, swung a foot over the saddle of her snowmobile, letting it hover over the ground as it coasted along, and hopped off just as it came to a stop.

"Why have we stopped, commander?"

"Corporate just got back to me with what we sent them from the fillstation. The lack of it, too," he added. "Since we're ahead of our projected schedule and a stone's throw from objective two, there's no reason we can't stop for lunch at the stones over there. Go over things."

Sandersfeld dismounted behind Sheridan, bothering with none of the flashiness, and glanced at the site his commander pointed to. At the top of the hill they'd been riding alongside were several basal boulders, rough and jagged, that contrasted with the smooth, white snow that spanned for miles. Around them was gravel.

Sandersfeld started towards it, just as Daniels and Tinashe arrived and began dismounting themselves, though the voice of Sykes stopped him.

"Sandersfeld, Sheridan, if I could have a moment beforehand."

There was a brief, active silence as each and every one of the four corporate mercenaries paused in silent panic. That could mean *anything*.

Tinashe excused herself with a cough. "Me and Daniels will go find places to sit."

Sykes nodded, and gesturing for Sandersfeld and Sheridan to follow, went further down the hill, stopping only after the rocks fully broke line of sight with Tinashe.

He turned to address the duo, unlatching his helmet and pinning it against his hip with the crook of his elbow.

Sykes wasn't entirely happy with his looks. His straight, jaw-length hair and mundane features were strikingly ordinary, a betrayal of his rank as commander. A small, insecure part of

him said *this* was why he spoke with such archetypal bravado— it was all just a projected facade, wasn't it?

Sykes flicked a switch in the helmet's interior, powering it off.

For chats like these, he wanted his soldiers to look him in the eye.

"Your helmets don't have the same transmitters mine does," Sykes explained. "Keep them on if you want. Neither of you are in trouble."

The rigidity in how his subordinates stood implied a doubt that neither of them was stupid enough to voice. Sykes figured that would be the case, and so he continued:

"“Sandersfeld, Sheridan, if there's *anything* that affects your ability or willingness to complete our current mission, you are to notify me. That's an order.” He made it a point of glancing between them. “Anything at all. Am I clear?”

Sheridan, whose body language stood at the midpoint between bewildered and concerned, shifted her weight. “I'm.. unsure what this is about, commander. You've read my employment history.” She hurriedly appended, “Sir.”

Sykes nodded. “Well, if that's the case, dismissed.”

The mercenary saluted, a little rigidly, then turned back towards her snowmobile. Sykes waited for Sheridan to leave earshot.

By elimination, there was only one person left. Sykes turned to the veteran.

His first name was Damien, Sykes knew, and he was pushing 54. He'd enlisted at 17 as an orbital assault trooper, been deployed to Sakkan, Nanshe, and Nanauatzin— those were the publicly listed locations— and was discharged under murky circumstances not long after earning the rank of Lieutenant. He'd been a police officer in his hometown until very recently.

Sykes liked him. It was only a matter of time before corporate saw fit to give the man his own squad— a record like his was wasted taking orders, not giving them— but until then, Sykes was more than happy to have the veteran.

“Sandersfeld.”

The veteran stood, attentive, but his composure betrayed absolutely nothing else. He was a hard read.

“Sir.”

“Is there anything I need to know which might affect your mission readiness, Sandersfeld? ”

An unmistakable tension hung in the air. Finally, Sandersfeld shook his head. “Nothing, sir.”

“Well, that's that then, since you've declared to me you're mission-capable.” Sykes clapped once, punctuating the sentence. He figured the veteran wouldn't confide anything, since what he didn't know, corporate *couldn't*, but it stung slightly at his ego. His pride was built off a mutual trust between him and his squad. “The specimen dogs going haywire gives us enough complications for this mission, doesn't it?”

“That... won't be an issue. Regardless, you can count on me.” Sandersfeld paused, then added, “I'm no bleeding heart, commander.”

At that, Sandersfeld began to turn and head towards the group, leaving something about that final comment to rub Sykes the wrong way. Had that really been the implication he'd been conveying?

“Sandersfeld, one last thing.”

He paused. “Sir?”

It took only that long for Sykes to realize the danger of the thought that had just occurred to him. He swiftly banished it from his mind. “I... haven't yet dismissed you. Return to your duties, soldier.”

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+6.4 hours

3 Kilometers from ground zero

Survivors

The dog had only been on Emil for a few seconds before Stella reacted, kicking it swiftly in the ribs. Maybe two or three.

Her leg impacted with a heavy thud, and the beast took the brunt of the blow, only flinching slightly as its jaws struggled to find gaps in the raised polycarbonate plates covering his neck. The coverage was partial— even a full set of containment armor, which Emil didn't have, preserved only an officer's vitals from freak accidents— and Emil's grimy white slash collar was blotched with dots of red from where the animal's teeth had broken the skin.

Mirza noticed Emil's ten millimeter pistol on the floor not two feet from where he stood.

"KILL IT," Emil gasped. His hands were locked around the animal's face as it fought him, trying to push down while he pushed up.

Cyrus, who held both spears, jabbed the glass-headed one into the animal, the broken shard SOMETHING skew and piercing an inch into the dog's haunch before it slipped from its seating and came loose.

Stella swore and glanced around and, upon realizing she was well and truly unarmed, grabbed the dog and pushed it off him. Its head came up as she dislodged the animal, and in a flash its jaws closed around her wrist. She pulled back instinctively, leaving its teeth to carve cuts across the back of her hand until something caught and it was the dog's turn to be pulled on.

What remained of Cyrus' spear— now just a mangled pool cue— came crashing down on the dog's back, cracking violently in half and making it stumble and nothing else.

Mirza put a ten millimeter hollow point bullet through the specimen dog's throat. The gun jumped in his hands and a puff of gas came up from the slide and the end of the barrel and the dog's jaws were clamped around Stella's hand for a second before going limp enough for her to pull back.

Cyrus stood up and took a step towards Mirza, relief or honor or obligation or something on his face for just a moment before it vanished as the weapon was trained on him.

Mirza locked eyes with Stella, who'd been surveying her hand with a grimace. The pistol stayed pointed towards Emil. "Your specimen dogs. They're smart. They can learn, can't they?"

"Y-yes," she stammered, "they're social. Experimental."

It made sense to Mirza. When the pink dogs first showed up at the shelter, they attacked and died in massed numbers, drawing back and surging forwards and drawing back and surging forwards until, just as almost all the ammunition had been depleted, they broke off. It had been a greuling, three-minute affair. Mirza's ears still hurt from all the gunfire.

"Our first impressions have given these animals an overabundance of caution. That is why we are alive. Unless something changes, they will soon learn better."

Emil stood up. "You're going to give me my pistol back, Mirza," he said plainly. Mirza couldn't help but notice that, despite presenting a neutral posture, the containment officer's feet were stanced.

"No. I need this. You don't."

Mirza walked forwards, pistol at chest height, leveled at Emil's gut, where the polycarbonate was thinnest, until they came face to face. He withdrew a pair of handcuffs from Emil's belt, who let him. Stella glanced nervously at Cyrus, who seemed equally apprehensive.

Mirza turned to the pair. One of his eyes broke tracking and swiveled around to watch Emil.

"Hold the spear out."

Cyrus stood and stared, until Stella's hand guided his wrist to hold the spear. Mirza pierced the back of his left hand on the point of the lashed-down combat knife. It collected, forming droplets that ran around the side of his hand, pooled for an instant before rolling onto the surface of the handcuffs, and then dribbled down its chain, spattering against the frozen carpet floor. The bleeding stopped once everyone's shoes were peppered with tiny pinpoints of red. In the spell of total silence, faint shuffling could be heard in the distance.

“Time is my enemy, so I am going to be simple. You are all going to go into the bunk room downstairs. I am going to gather supplies and leave. You are going to do what I say because I have the guns and you want to live. Some of the dogs are going to stay here until the scent of the blood goes away. Some are not. Everyone gets to choose what they think will guarantee their survival.”

Emil’s chest rose and fell for three breaths that condensed on the inside of his visor. He pulled his upper lip back in a wisp of a sneer.

“I’m not fucking going out there with you. Fuck you. None of this would’ve happened if you had the sense to stay where you fucking belonged.”

“No. You said you like your chances here, Emil.” Mirza smiled gently as he slipped one side of the cuffs around Emil’s wrists. The blood clinging to them wicked into his uniform’s white sleeve, staining it. “I like them, too.”

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+3 days

3.9 Kilometers from ground zero

Spooks

Mirza’s thumb rubbed against the ziptie cuffs binding his wrists. Uncomfortable as they were, he was pretty sure he could get out of them, aramid fibers or no.

That wasn’t the question, though. The question persisted what his captor would do about it.

Mirza slowed his pace, knowing it would garner the attention and likely annoyance of the woman behind him. He cleared his throat, then asked, “Who are you?”

“Magdalene,” she replied. “Call me Magdalene.”

That wasn’t a suitable answer and he knew it and she knew he knew it. Yet she was “Magdalene”.

“Ok. Mrs. ‘Magdalene Artier’.” Mirza sniffed. Snow, broken up by the occasional ingress of volcanic rock, spanned far in front of him. He was having more fun with this than he thought. “We clearly seem to be similar, except for the roles we fill. So: whose lapdog are you?”

“I’m not anyone’s lapdog,” she growled.

“But you aren’t a “bleeding heart”, Miss, Magdalene? And your friend certainly did not seem to consider you a *stray*, as he put it. So, what color is the leash around your neck?”

Artier’s footsteps halted.

“I’m-” Her voice was softer, defensive, nearly explanatory as it trailed off. For just a moment, her guard was down.

“Well?”

“Keep moving,” she snarled. “Don’t talk like you know who the fuck I am.”

Mirza smiled, letting a small feeling of vindication spread through his chest. He figured he wasn’t going to get any further with this line of questioning. Sure, he could’ve been nicer, but there was no love lost between him and people like this woman. He knew her type. She wasn’t, and never would be, his friend. He owed her nothing.

They walked together, sharing a spiteful silence, until a declaration cut through his musings: “Over there.”

In the distance sat a squat, angular concrete structure, utilitarian in design. It crouched on the edge of a hill, protruding from the snow, an open defiance of the natural landscape around it.

Above a set of metal double doors, flanked on either side by a pair of bare concrete buttresses, was a designation in stenciled paint:

I-72.

The ground in front of the door was littered with the snow-dusted corpses of pink, four-eared dogs.

A feeling of unease crawled up the length of Mirza's spine. Once his eyes had identified the shape of the partially-buried specimen dogs, more and more seemed to resolve themselves, dozens of pink fish shoring up from an ocean of crystal snow, piling up atop each other in splayed heaps.

How many were there? What could have done this?

"We can take a break in there," she declared.

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+18 hours

1.5 Kilometers from ground zero

Corporate Mercenaries

Sheridan's lunch was menu 8: Pierogi with Rice and Peas. It was a difficult meal to enjoy with the scene that played out in front of her.

Tinashe sat on Daniels' lap, reaching up and playing with his hair as he paid her no mind. All of his attention was spent going over his unspooled belts of ammunition, tapping each cartridge with a finger before indexing to the next one: meditative, trance-like, with great deliberation.

Nobody touched Sheridan in the way Tinashe was touching him. Not like that.

She didn't like her dynamic in the squad. There was a distinct fissure, an unbridgeable gap between her standing and the tight-knit cordiality between Sykes, Sheridan, and Daniels.

Nobody ever touched Sheridan like that.

Her pierogis were cold.

And there was Daniels, ignoring her, spending all his damn focus on the row of bullets in front of him, checking them or counting them or whatever the hell he was doing with the belts. He should touch her back. If it was Tinashe, or anyone on Sheridan's lap, *she'd* touch them back.

She tore her eyes away from the duo, past Sykes, who leaned up against a boulder and took notes, and to Sandersfeld, who sat perched up on the tallest of the rocks. The Jile dagger he kept in the small of his back was in his hands, and he ran the claw-shaped traditional blade over and over a snowy whetstone.

He was a long way from home. He should've been at the same level as Sheridan— they were both new hires after all— but he just *wasn't*. He had at least twenty years of experience on Sheridan, and Sykes seemed more than happy to treat him as an equal, like some-

Sheridan's pierogies had been exposed to the arctic winds for too long, and were now frozen.

"Shit," she swore, and tossed them into their retort pouch, then the retort pouch back into their ration heater, which sat plugged in at her feet.

Sheridan's Pierogies were now inaccessible, which was worse than cold. She watched them bask in the orangey glow of the oven interior, trying her best not to look at the cuddling duo just barely beyond the boxy appliance.

And then Sandersfeld was crouching in front of her, just beyond the plugged-in ration heater, Jile held southpaw, crouching. She hadn't heard him approach.

He tilted his head towards a far-off convoy. "Look sharp. That must be the Veitbac TDM."

She grabbed her retort pouch from the oven as the rest of the squad assembled beside the rocks. Sheridan's Pierogies were lukewarm on the outside and frigid on the inside. She resigned herself to their mediocrity as the five of them lay prone behind the rocks, observing the convoy trundle closer and closer into the valley below.

"Veitbac" was the nearest civilized municipal area. Three-fourths of the original 700 souls aboard the first ship to Awarn were francophonic, of which sixteen percent hailed as refugees from the late Indochinese Republic. Much of the frigid north had been settled by this demographic, left untouched by less resourceful and industrious groups. This, naming it had been their honor: Veit Bac— the Viet people of the north.

There must've been at least a hundred of them; no less than a company. They wore bright red jackets and surplus rigs, no armor, and wore their weapons by the slings as they walked alongside the trucks in a loosely organized convoy.

The troops were close enough to see by the time Sheridan finished off her shitty Pierogies, and they carried firearms from a mishmash of different time periods. Most held Martin-Cooke 67 pulse hybrids, the reigning service rifle for much of the Bug wars, though many more carried older XM7A5s from the Neoamerican Theocracy's invasion of the Bering. Others held M16 carbines, complete with steel magazines, and there were at least two of the eternal Mosin-Nagant three-line rifle.

"We can't let them reach the lab," Sykes announced grimly.

Daniels, beside him, had his helmet back on, and the machine gun's bipod deployed in front of him. Sprawling on the gravel behind him were all three of his remaining belts, which sat linked into a single, continuous feed. The weapon's charging handle let out a heavy mechanical **k-chk** as he racked it.

Sheridan glanced between the machine gunner and Sykes. "Commander, we don't have that kind of firepower."

The commander said nothing, statuesque, as he studied the soldiers below. His visor was a blank, obtuse reflection of his own rifle, his hands, and the rocky snow beneath them.

"We might," Daniels suggested. He shouldered his Angie, sighting it in on the second to foremost truck.

In the valley below, it trundled along, oblivious.

"We don't," Sandersfeld objected. There was a factual intensity in his voice as he crouched behind a rock a ways' from the rest of the squad. "They've got MC-67s. They're hybrid, but the pulse-boosted rounds will rip through five feet of soil and keep going through our plates."

Daniels didn't seem far convinced, shrugging. "Yeah, and they could just be shooting normal gunpowder. They seem scrappy," he argued.

“They wouldn’t be issued hardware that expensive unless they stocked the ammunition to go along with it. No officer trusts infantry that much.”

“You don’t know that.”

Sandersfeld, from behind his rock, breathed heavily several times over comms. “Amar Daniels,” he said levelly, “as your equal in rank, I suggest you enable your weapon’s safety and wait for orders.”

It was everything but an order.

Daniels glanced at him, from the corner of his visor, and kept his weapon’s bead on the truck.

Tinashe, stuck between them, fidgeted uncomfortably. “They might not be going to the lab,” she suggested. “All the comms in there are encrypted. Anything the military would pick up on would be broadcasted by groups outside the lab.”

After such a prolonged silence, Sykes finally spoke up. “Stow the weapon, Danny. This is an open case now. Was the moment the military caught wind of the situation. But it’s not a shitshow. Not until they reach the lab.”

It was only then that Daniels flicked his machine gun’s safety back on and began spooling the belts back into their box. All a little more glumly than he probably should have.

The sudden change in stance seemed odd to Sheridan. “It’s not?”

“Not yet. Right now, this is an *incident*, Sheridan. Incidents happen. Nobody’s ever been purged because of an incident. The worst the Federation will do is fine the pants off PeraTek.”

Sykes laughed, hoping the fear in his voice wouldn’t show. Corporate purges formally ordained the total liquidation of any commercial entity deemed to not recognize Federal authority. They were the boogeyman that hid in the closet of every CEO in the Federation; an axe above every shareholder’s neck; a loaded gun pressed against the back of each lobbied politician’s skull.

If PeraTek was determined to be a threat to the political integrity of the Federation, its intelligence and paramilitary assets would be the first to be inquired upon. The Response Specialists knew they'd be at the *absolute* front of the line.

After letting the implications settle for a moment, Sykes continued. "This won't be an incident anymore if the convoy makes it to the lab's server rooms. It sure as hell won't be one if we hurt a hair on a TDM soldier's head. Tinashe, contact corporate. As commander of the First Response Intelligence Force, my official recommendation is that PeraTech should allocate as many resources as possible towards aiding the Veitbac efforts."

Tinashe paused, fingers hovering over the laptop she'd just unfolded. "How come, boss?"

"I'll be honest: human resources' normal operations can delay the military longer than anything under the sun we could do right now."

The squad technician chortled, but Sykes was dead serious as he spoke.

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle
T+7.4 hours
3.7 Kilometers from ground zero
Survivors

Stella's ears rang.

And rang.

And rang.

And they kept ringing, the shrill reverberations of tinnitus bouncing around her skull, even as Cyrus walked up to her and half collapsed, half sat in the snow beside her.

She clicked her ears several times, hoping it would dispel the continued ringing enough for some level of conversation to take place.

"So."

“So?”

“Do you think we made the right choice throwing our lot in with him?”

Stella leaned back, following Cyrus’ line of sight to the parka-clad man who stood at the top of the hill they were on, surveying the dying field of dogs with an unreadable expression. All around him were pocks in the fluffy snow where hot casings melted their way down to the compacted layers below.

The plan had worked: the pack of dogs had been split, drawn away from an easy regrouping, and beaten back with overwhelming violence, leaving the survivors still away from the fillstation with a healthy respect for the invention of gunpowder.

Now all they had to worry about was roughing it through the Veitbac arctic wilderness, while injured, on hours of sleep, without ammunition, in the early morning.

Stella gingerly held her nose, testing the organ’s sensitivity. It was red and crooked; all but guaranteed to be broken.

It hadn’t been a dog’s paw that inflicted the injury, either.

“After what Emil bulled? Fuck him. He’s got the shelter’s distress beagon. The responce from corborate should find him before he starbes.”

Cyrus said nothing; it hadn’t been his nose that’d been bashed in. He continued to study the man— using the term loosely— atop the hill. Mirza met his gaze for an instant, and Cyrus looked away quickly.

“I just don’t know if we can trust him. He’s not human. Not in the same way we are.”

Stella took a sip from the thermos she’d been using to warm her hands. The rich, complex flavor of creamer and coffee mixed with the lingering taste of iron in her mouth. The biochemist at the back of Stella’s brain notified her that lipids, proteins, and calories were an absolute necessity in situations like this.

“We can’t trust anyone, Cyrus. Those are the rules of nature.”

“Oh.”

“But human or not, he has no reason to hurt us. We’re safer from other threats with him around, and he’s safer from other threats with us around. The dogs don’t hunt in packs because they trust each other, or anyone sat them down and explained how they’d be better off working together. It’s in their genes. The natural order of things rewards interreliance.”

“Until it doesn’t.”

Stella patted Cyrus’ back, rubbing it. “Then let’s try our best to make it to that part, shall we?” She smiled.

In front of them, the sun hadn’t yet broken over the horizon, but the faint colors of the twilight were beginning to, casting a subtle pink that just barely danced on the distant hills.

Mirza took a seat two paces from the duo. “I hope I am not interrupting anything.” He crossed his legs beneath him.

“But it is only a matter of time until we are hounded once again.” He broke into a miniscule, proud smile at the intentional pun. “A permanent fortification is in order, without the vulnerable layout of another fillstation.”

Mirza locked gazes with Stella as he spoke, and continued into the silence afterwards. Stella pursed her lips as she wracked her memory for any structures that might be nearby.

“There should be a mechanical access point to the facility’s pipe network nearby.”

“There is?” Mirza stood up. “Yes, that should work.”

Stella nodded. “If we were just at station 13, it’d I-72, I think.”

Mirza shook his head. “We’ve got to keep going,” he murmured, “not bunker I-72. That’s where Mariam and Kerwyn came from.”

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+3 days

3.9 Kilometers from ground zero

Spooks

Senior Field Agent “Magdalene” Artier crouched over one of the four-eared bioengineered dogs, elbows on her knees, surveying its body for what had killed it. She’d dragged it out from beneath a 2-inch blanket of snow, and the cadaver now lay on the concrete landing just outside structure I-72’s doorway.

With what she’d read about the severity of the nearby incident, there couldn’t be many of the beasts left. It was an open secret that PeraTech used genetically modified animals to “vanish” those attempting to break out of— or into— their facilities, but at the end of the day, they were just that: animals.

And whatever had left a literal field of their corpses outside I-72 *wasn’t*.

She only knew the basics of forensics, but she could be certain that the dog had died violently. The body was stiff from a combination of rigor mortis and freezing, though several of the bones in its ribcage, legs, and snout were broken. It had been cut severely: three extreme lacerations, two on its back, and one on its face bit deep into the bone below the fur, staining the animal’s coat a matted, blackish red.

If she was being optimistic, Agent Artier would have concluded that a group of ancient earth knights had been transported through space and time, misidentified the dogs as demons, and then killed them with polearms.

Somehow, she doubted that was the case.

Standing up, the field agent turned to her detainee. “What do you know about this structure?”

Mirza’s gaze dialed in from the mountains far off in the distance, retracting over the snow-choked hills, over the two sets of footsteps they’d left on their way here, over the bodies of the dogs, the brutalist edges of the concrete landing, and only then meeting with hers. He sat up against the opposing concrete wall, one leg extended and the other comfortably bent.

“A member of my old group sheltered here for a little while. Her name was Mariam. Paranoid and jumpy, would always hold onto the pepper spray she thought we didn’t know was in her purse. Killed herself with fire.” There was a deep, severe weariness in his voice that completely drowned out any hints of condolence. He sighed, then added, “I want a cigarette”

“There might be some inside.” ‘Magdalene’ stood up. “Show me your wrists.”

It took the man a moment to rise to his feet without the faculty his arms provided, and he turned around, bending slightly to present his zip tie cuffs at his back.

There was a small notch in them Artier pretended to ignore as she engaged the release, prompting the plastic loops to expand under tension.

Mirza began walking forward.

“Wait.” The field agent reached into her waistband, then produced a small, though relatively long-barreled derringer. She offered it to her detainee. “Take it.”

Mirza rubbed his wrists, studying her, then carefully reached for the gun. Just before his hand closed around the pistol, she pulled it back.

“You only get two shots.” She offered it, and as his grasp closed around the gun, Artier seized his shoulder, leaning forward to hiss a whisper into his ear: “*God fucking help you if you point that thing at me and miss.*”

He nodded, taking her word for it, as Senior Field Agent Artier unholstered her own pistol and the pair went inside.

Down a waffle-cut metal staircase was a more open, concrete-floored workshop. A loosely ordered grid of steel tables, shelves, crates, and half-gutted machinery populated the room, save for a corner where more of the mangled dogs had been piled up.

In the middle of the workshop floor were eight bodies under tarps, organized in a neat line.

Some of them weren’t as complete as they should have been. Others, obscured beneath the sheets of plastic, seemed like they might possibly be more complete than they should have.

Artier pulled her gaze away from the bodies and scanned over the room before glancing towards Mirza. "Once it's confirmed clear, you get half an hour or however long it takes me to."

"Not sooner?"

"You look like dogshit," the woman said, "and I'm not exactly on a tight timetable. Get some food in you and take twenty. It'll take me a bit to finish either way."

"Finish what, Miss Magdalene?"

The woman didn't bother replying. She just leveled her pistol and went about sweeping the workshop floor.

Mirza made no attempts to follow in her motions, instead opting to pull out a stool from beneath a nearby lathe to sit down on. Whether at her instruction or not, he was going to rest up here regardless.

Whatever happened here, had already happened, past tense, if the orderliness of the tarps was anything to go by. The occasional rifle casing littered the ground, though the surrounding concrete walls and machinery were marred with both burst-shaped bullet impacts and deep, half-molten pulse marks.

There wasn't much to the building, either. Just beyond the main floor was a small office, segregated by sheet metal and steel-frame windows, and past it, a break, changing, and then pump machinery room. A long corridor lined with pipes intersected the pump room, spanning off towards the facility in one direction and the nearest settlement in another, though chain-link fences blocked access to the tunnel.

The fence on the facility side was shredded, reduced to a tangle of metal wire on the floor, then at some point thereafter later blockaded by crudely welded-on sheet metal.

After her circuit, Artier made her way back to the main floor, where Mirza was in the midst of procuring a tuna fish sandwich from a lunchbox that didn't seem to be his. An open can of soda sat on the floor next to him.

"Hey."

“Hey.” Neither glanced at the other as she continued past him and towards the bodies.

Holstering her pistol, Magdalene unzipped her vest’s admin pouch— a small, rectangular pocket near the top of the vest in which paperwork was kept— and produced a mid-sized touchscreen tablet.

She walked down the row of cadavers, periodically pausing glancing at her device’s screen, and stopped at the second-to-last one, demarcated from the others by a small green pinpoint icon on her tablet.

The body was as different from all the others as it was the same: a rough outline of the human figure, unmoving, legs straight and arms at the sides, given intermodal repose by a thin, wrinkled layer of plastic. Though shrouded as it was, this one was larger than the others— taller, though bulkier, too, without the imprint of a face pressing up through its shroud.

Instead, it bore the signature outline of a helmet.

Having had his attention caught, Mirza watched as she pulled back the top half of the tarp, exposing the corpse of an individual dressed in some kind of environmental suit. Its base seemed a thick-woven, charcoal-gray cloth— kevlar, at absolute least— and the arms, torso, thighs, and neck were protected by segmented, intricate plates whose copper-green paint was beginning to scrape.

The helmet’s visor was cracked, and the rigid portions of armor bore black starburst patterns from where they’d been shot. Several sections of the suit’s fabric layer bore similar signs of gunshot trauma: portions of the synthetic material were fluffy and ripped, like little cotton balls that had sprouted in wake of a bullet’s penetration, then clumped and matted by the blood that had spilled out afterwards.

Possibly most concerning was the presence of cuts on the body. Profuse, precise gashes that scythed through select portions of the suit’s cloth layer— the vitals at the neck, armpits, and thighs— that had been soaked through, nearly dyed black, by the heavy arterial bleeding that must have followed.

There weren’t many things that could cut through the ultratensile synthetic material that made up armor like this, Artier knew, and *far* less that could be serviceable as handheld

weapons. The blade making those cuts must have been *considerably* sharp and going *considerably* fast.

Nonetheless, playing detective wasn't what she was paid to do.

Artier knelt down, and retrieving a folding knife from her waistband, slid the thin blade between two armor plates on the helmet's side, right where the stubby radio antenna joined with the main body of the helmet. She wriggled the blade, leveraging it this way and that, until the panel holding the antenna popped off, prompting a small tangle of electronics to spill out after it.

Fishing around her vest for a cord that she plugged into her tablet, Artier set about splicing the cable into the helmet's wiring.

Mirza stood up and approached to watch her, stopping a few paces back. He finished chewing before speaking.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting credentials."

"For?"

"The PeraTek facility I'm taking you to, which you're going to show me around."

Mirza chased his bite of sandwich with a swig of grape cola. "I'm not going back there."

Artier typed something into her tablet, glanced up at the wires, down at the tablet, then back up at the wires before cutting two. "Well, you haven't tried to run away or stop me, so yes. Yes, you are."

The derringer she'd given him was still in his pocket. He could see it clearly in his mind's eye, through the cloth. How fast was his draw? How fast was *her* draw?

"Are you a hacker, Magdalene?"

"I just plug things in. If *that* much a hacker made, electricians would command far more fear and respect."

“Who do you work for?”

“Jimbob's plumbing and animal control services.” She paused, then glanced behind herself. The field agent had pulled her facewrap down and her goggles up, baring a strikingly young face for the woman that carried it. She couldn't have been older than thirty. “Mr. Shourab, are you a citizen of the United Federation of Planets or any of her sovereign territories? You never answered that question.”

“You work for the government, then.”

“Nope.” The woman wagged a finger. “My checks get signed by Jimbob.”

A sliver of a grin found its way onto Artier's face, prompting Mirza to indulge the line of questioning. “Okay. Okay, what services does Jim Bob provide?”

“Well, we investigate leaks and catch strays.”

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+19 hours

1.5 Kilometers from ground zero

Corporate Mercenaries

Trung-shi Thanh Hào Mei of the Veitbac TDF watched in suspicion as five armed individuals, dressed very obviously in PeraTek regalia, came marching down the hill. Each pushed a snowmobile at their side, and they wore enclosed suits whose green visors gave no witness to their faces. Four carried modern-looking pulse weapons, while the fifth carried a machine gun.

Thanh fidgeted with the flip-up rear sight on his XM7A5 as they approached. It was a surplus American rifle from the late twenty-first century. Fussing with the sights made for an easy habit.

Four of the pinkertons of them stopped further back, though the fifth, likely their commander, stopped directly in front of Thanh and saluted in greeting.

“Commander Anton Sykes of the PeraTek Initial Response Force.”

“Trung Sh-” Having re-evaluated the presumed geosocial education of the man before him, Thanh cut himself off. “*Sargent* Thanh Mei of the Veitbac Territorial Defense Militia.” He frowned, and adjusted his sunglasses, and added: “Just what the hell are you doing out here, Mr. Anton Sykes?”

“Running a little ahead of schedule, it seems,” He grumbled. “There’s been an incident at the nearby facility that corporate *should* have contacted your people about. My squad’s goal is to evaluate the damages and determine what kind of relief effort should be assembled.”

Thanh mulled over the man’s words carefully. According to his briefing, PeraTek had made no such efforts to communicate with anyone. It had been a police station receiving survivors that first contacted the militia, and PeraTek had actively declined to comment when asked, going so far as to threaten a Warrantless Inquiry lawsuit when pressed.

Someone was going to be in immense trouble before all was said and done. Thanh smiled— internally, of course. He wasn’t going to play his hand just yet, though.

Instead, the officer feigned a thoughtful look. “I’m sorry, Mr. Sykes, I haven’t heard anything of the sort. What are you doing right now?”

“Well...” He paused, flipped down a tablet that had been stowed against the upper section of his breastplate, and tapped at it for a moment. “Our current orders are to investigate fillstations 12, 8, and 6— those are the numbered bunker structures you’ve seen with the fueltanks out front— and then ensure the safety of a PeraTek VIP at mechanical depot I-72. Afterwards, it’s making sure the facility proper is secure and prepared for relief.” Sykes cleared his throat. “Of course, we’d be more than happy to co-operate with the Veitbac TDM if there’s any pressing matters you’d need our organizational experience with.”

Trung-Shi Thanh flicked his XM7’s rear sight down, then up, then down again as the man in front of him spoke, picking apart the words as they came out. There was an unspoken discomfort in the corporate soldier’s tone; a desire to show how little he had to hide, wrapped in the excuse of protocol.

This man was showing his stomach, and Thanh would have to have been stupid *not* to take advantage of the fact. The officer waved his hand in deference.

"None at all, Mr. Sykes. In fact, I was just about to make a similar offer to *you*. My men are more than capable of securing these fillstations you mentioned, if you'd like to continue straight towards ensuring the safety of your VIP. We'd just need maps of the surrounding area that highlight the buildings in question."

Thanh paused, daring the man in front of him to voice an objection. Surprisingly, Sykes didn't. The officer continued his Monologue.

"In fact, I'd be honored if you let me personally lead a squad in assisting you at the I-72 mechanical station. I'm sure you'd be in *considerably* hot water if danger befell a high-ranking PeraTek official on your watch, and I doubt any expenses are worth sparing."

"Well..." Sykes hesitated for a moment, allowing Thanh to enjoy a considerable amount of schadenfreude. Nonetheless, he stepped forwards, offering a titanium-clad handshake. "I'd be honored, Tun- Tr- Sargent Thanh."

Thanh took his hand, shaking it. The armored surface of the mercenary's glove was as cold as the arctic wind to the touch.

"The pleasure's mine."

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle
T+3.5 hours
3.9 Kilometers from ground zero
Survivors

The fireaxe in Kewryn's hands hovered above his head, if only for a moment, before he brought it crashing down.

The spike end of the axe's head split the hardhat worn by the squirming figure at his feet and kept going, stopping only after it had bitten deep into the skull below.

"Jesus Christ," he panted.

The smoky, ammonia-like scent of cheap gunpowder hung in the pump station's dim atmosphere.

Mariam peeked out from behind the pillar she'd taken cover behind, then slowly approached. One shaking hand clutched at her purse straps, while the other kept a table knife pointed towards the body at Kewryn's feet, as if it might get up again.

"What... what's wrong with these people?" She stuttered. Even after she'd changed out of her high heels, Mariam teetered with all the stability of a newborn giraffe.

"Couldn't say."

Kewryn hoisted his axe, hanging it around his shoulders with a makeshift sling he'd devised earlier, and approached the second body that lay cooling against the facility's concrete floor.

This one rested sprawled in one of the industrial double doorways leading out from the pumpstation's vestibule. Not far from it, his shotgun laid on the bare concrete floor, accompanied by three spent shells.

The pair had been survivors— past tense— and fairly well equipped ones, at that. The one with a hard hat— a woman— wore a soft ballistic vest, while the second wore an industrial gas mask and crude armor made of paper taped to a PeraTek winter coat.

Both had gaping, golf ball-sized boreholes in the soft tissue at their throats, just above the collarbones. The duo had attacked on sight, acting with feral aggression and brandishing a rebar spear and pipe wrench each.

There was a third in similar condition, dead, chained to a steel folding chair in the break room. Kewryn recognized her face— she'd been a fellow technician— but their relationship had been only in passing. He didn't know her name or where she was from. He felt bad, now.

Kewryn stopped a few paces from the man's body, eyeing a structure might have been the man's larynx, just waiting for something to stir in the gaping, perfectly circular cavity in his neck.

Nothing did.

He picked his shotgun up and racked the action, ejecting a scorched, green shell. From the thigh pocket on his boilersuit, Kewryn produced four new shells and loaded them one at a time into the weapon's magazine.

Mariam watched him from four paces back. She was still wearing her necklace and earrings and eyeshadow and pantyhose and her miniskirt and her navy blue blouse—the woman's shoes had been the only thing Kewryn successfully convinced her to leave behind—and would have seemed on the verge of crying, or throwing up, or both, had Kewryn seen any other facial expression from the woman.

“W-we’re not staying here any longer, are we?”

Kewryn furrowed his brow and glanced at his watch. “It’s... one in the morning and the night’s only getting colder. You wouldn’t make it, unless you change out of-”

“NO!” Mariam cried. She withdrew slightly, possibly embarrassed by her own response, and followed up with a slightly softer, “I don’t want to.”

Kewryn knew, realistically speaking, that he was probably better off leaving her behind. Mariam seemed to have little in the way of situational awareness, was unable to dress a wound or defend herself, ate twice as much food as he did, had wandered off several times and drawn danger to him, and seemed totally, adamantly unwilling to wear *anything* that wasn’t the secretarial officewear she’d been in at the start of this mess.

In fact, now that it was in the forefront of Kewryn’s mind, abandoning Mariam seemed like just about the best thing to do. He just couldn’t bring himself to abandon Mariam to whatever fate would befall her without his direct supervision. She hadn’t done anything to deserve mistreatment, had she? She was just as scared shitless as he was; they just had different ways of showing it.

“Then get comfy. I’m going to go find a scarf or something, cover my neck. We’ll sleep in shifts.”

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+3 days

3.9 Kilometers from ground zero

Spooks

Mirza watched the agent work as he chewed his sandwich.

“So... What kinda mansion they put you in?”

She sat crosslegged above the armored body, tablet propped up against the plating on its forearm, spliced cable snaking from it and plugging into the exposed electronics of its helmet. The dim glow of its screen shone with a slowly filling progress bar, casting shadows of machinery against the walls. Outside, the wind seemed to be picking up.

The agent— Magdaline, supposedly— blinked, just zoning in. “Hm?”

“Just making small talk. There has to be good rewards for this kind of work.”

She turned partway to face him and gestured. “Shourab, since you’re closer, get me another of those sodas, will you?”

Mirza followed the woman's pointing finger to the half-empty can of grape soda at his feet.

He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to get up from his bench. His legs were still sore, feeling as if they were made of lead. The deep exhaustion in his muscles seemed only to have set further now that he was finally resting them.

Clearly, however, this conversation had a price. Picking it up, he took a sip, not caring that the acidic beverage mixed poorly with the taste of tuna in his mouth, and slid it across the concrete floor to her.

She studied it reluctantly before taking a swig. “They don’t. This stuff doesn’t get as much funding as the movies’d have you believe.”

"Why do it?"

"The job has other appeals." She turned a little more his way and leaned back, resting the weight of her body on an arm. "A lot of them are personal."

"Don't actually try and tell me you're the good guys."

Magdaline threw back her drink. "They pay me well enough and they don't make me do anything unconscionable. As far as I'm concerned, we're good enough."

Mirza chewed for a moment on that last sentence. Thus far, she'd been bizarrely conducive to his questioning. But why? This was to his benefit. He kept pressing.

"Make you? They don't ask?"

"We're not the youth scouts. There's commitment. Demands, too."

"I noticed when Dodson tried to kill me."

"He did. And you did go at me with a screwdriver. The entry team aren't exactly a bunch of moralists."

"Before that, I meant."

Agent Magdaline twirled her long, blond hair around a finger and grinned, saying nothing. She was totally sprawled out now, as if on a couch in a lover's home. The light off the screen glinted on her teeth. Mirza wasn't able to count them all before she spoke.

"You don't talk like a human does, Mirza."

Mirza stared at her, unease winding its way into the pit of his stomach. After a second, she laughed and continued.

"Not always. There's speech patterns we're trained to watch out for. Ones that serve the express purpose of integrating into a larger social group. Build comfort and trust by signalling it, requesting food, displaying easiness. Little things, at first. Don't you notice?"

Mirza was standing up, he only now realized, ready to be anywhere that wasn't here and with her. He felt *threatened*.

"I- wha- who the fuck are you, really? What do you want with me?"

"Ah, shit." The agent glanced at her watch. "Seems like the time's up and I've finished my download. Let's go."

"No, it isn't," Mirza countered. There was no way he'd only been resting for half an hour. Was she fucking with him? Had this been some test all along?

Magdaline just unplugged her tablet and wound up the cables.

"You got a watch you've been timing with?"

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle
T+19 hours
3.9 Kilometers from ground zero
Corporate Mercenaries

Commander Sykes rode in relative silence with the Veitbac officer.

It was just the two of them in the command vehicle at the convoy's rear, not that there were many windows to verify where, exactly, they were. The only illumination in the vehicle's cramped interior were the dim glow of console screens and the harsh brilliance of sunlight filtering in through the periscopes.

It was an entirely bespoke Veitbac conversion, Trung-Shi Thanh had explained with pride. A pre-Theocracy Abrams tank that they'd taken the turret from and refitted with Taiwano-soviet sensors, then later a Neo-Alashiyan datalink.

"The best of the third world war," Thanh had boasted, "united in one chassis."

Sykes was more impressed that vehicles from the twenty-first century were being used outside of museum demos.

All the same, the ride was bumpy. Whatever stones lay hidden beneath the arctic snow's pristine surface played poorly with the heavy vehicle's tracks, exacerbated by the convoy's worth of tire disturbance before them.

Sykes glanced at his PDA. He'd entirely given up on using the tank's periscopes to navigate, instead relying on his tablet's GPS for a vague estimate of where they were. The P.O.I. was coming up.

"The building should be coming into view over this hill."

Thanh, who was seated beside Sykes in the vehicle's "Gunner" seat, barked several orders into a cluster of microphones coming from one of the consoles beside him. Sykes recognized a scant few of the words as belonging to French creole. The others sounded to be of an Asian diction, possibly.

The ambient racket of the command vehicle's engine died down to a more tolerable level as Thanh took his hands off his console's control station. The small navigation icon on Sykes' screen slowed to a stop.

"Mr. Anton Sykes," Thanh drawled, "get out of my tank and please form up with your squadron at the building's entrance."

"Do you have a plan for this?"

The officer paused to shoot Sykes a half-bemused glance as he unfolded the stock on his rifle. "One thing at a time, Mr. Mercenary."

Sykes shrugged and opened the—literal—metal door providing egress on the top of the command vehicle. Where it wasn't a forest of antennas, the top of the vehicle was a mishmash of welded-together armor plating, periscopes, optics, and countermeasure systems, none of which seemed to come from the same source.

Sykes took care not to let the door fall closed and dismounted from the tank.

Embedded into the hillside across from Sykes was the concrete landing of Pumpstation I-72. Evidence of a ruined furniture barricade—now splintered plywood and bent metal—lay wrecked on the porch.

Scattered around the remains of the barricade, being piled off to one side by the Veitbac, leaving crimson smears in the snow, hanging disemboweled from the ruined tables and desks, and trailing further inside the pump facility were the countless bodies of several PeraTek Facility Perimeter Security Canines.

Or, as Sykes made it a habit to call them whenever he wasn't beholden to his corporate obligations, Fucking Mongrels.

Most of the Veitbac militia seemed content to mill around looking busy from the relative safety of their trucks, with the rest appearing seeming discontent as they piled the closer of the four-eared dogs off to one side. None of the faces Sykes scanned seemed enthused by the prospect of getting too close to the pump-station, though it enabled him to find his squadron quite easily.

Sykes' squad were gathered at the precipice of the mess on landing, gathered around a half-crumpled sheet of notebook paper.

"That love letter for me?" He asked as he drew near.

Tinashe offered a friendly wave and spoke up first. "Fraid not, boss. Just a note."

"Let's hear the condensed version."

"Okay! So—" she shook the page, stiffening it "— our author's a PeraTek employee, maintenance or something, not the V.I.P, who they say is still boarded up inside. They found three casualties from an earlier group and decided not to stay, possibility of parasitics."

The contents of the note struck Sykes as oddly informative. "So it's a love letter to us, collectively. There a signature?"

"Ker- uh- Kewryn Jiminez."

It didn't ring any bells.

"And what exactly, does parasitics mean, Mr. Anton Sykes?"

Thanh, who had approached at some indeterminate point, made his presence known, hands resting on the top rail of his slung rifle. Daniels eyed him.

“Any number of things, none of them good. How’d you like to do this?”

The Veitbac officer fell silently pensive, flicking his rifle’s rear sight up and down in thought. This was likely the first time he’d been faced with the prospect of combat in years, Sykes surmised, if ever.

The Federation’s territorial forces rarely received her best officers. While the lack of prestige and funding kept gloryhounds away, it opened the ecosystem up to unfavored nepotists, cadets with poor scores, and disgraced NCOs.

Sykes wondered which one Thanh was.

“Five squads. You mercenaries have sealed suits, so each of you will be the first to enter in each squad. My corporals will lead three squads, I will take a fourth, and you the final. Is that objectionable?”

Sykes nodded appreciatively. It was clever to send Sykes’ Response Specialists in first, to protect his own troops and leverage their equipment, and even more so to split them up under valid pretenses.

The sound of a notification preluded Tinashe’s voice whispering in Sykes’ left ear over communications. “Boss, I’m a *technician*.”

“You’re a technician with a pulse weapon and three years of shooting. Do what the nice man says.”

Thanh glanced between the duo, saying nothing. “Is there any way you’d wish to split your subordinates, Mr. Sykes?”

“That I would. Sandersfeld and Danny boy?” The pair stepped forwards, and Sykes held onto Daniels’ upper arm demonstratively. “Give my machine gunner to your most aggressive corporal and the other to your least experienced, unless they’re the same person.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, Sandersfeld used to be an officer in the naval infantry. He’s a level head if things go sideways.”

“Mmhmm. And of your machine gunner?”

“Well...” Sykes turned to his pointman. “He’s a machine gunner.”

“I want all of my Corporals to raise their hands.”

Three arms went up, and Thanh called them forwards. Oddly enough, Sykes recognized them to be the ones carrying the Mosin-Nagant bolt action rifles— Two were men in their early thirties, and the third was a harder tell, wearing a balaclava. One of the men wore an armor vest, and the other’s was wooden with a bayonet, rather than polymer.

“Somphet, Ha, and Tien, this is the leader of the corporate forces.” He turned to Sykes, quietly adding, “And no, yankee, I don’t expect you to remember their names.”

The officer turned to address his gathered soldiers. He spoke matter-of-factly, arms behind his back in rigid posture.

“Evidence points to there being dangerous lifeforms and civilians in the building. We will split into five groups Each RANK will lead one, I will lead a fourth, and the mercenary captain will lead the fifth. The corporate soldiers, with their sealed armor suits, will take point. Avoid shooting to kill unless it’s necessary. Any objections?”

Awarn, Northern Arctic Circle

T+3.9 hours

3.9 Kilometers from ground zero

Survivors

A pang of unease went through Mariam's gut as she stepped out of the bathroom.

Kewryn had positioned the three bodies face-up and next to one another, covered each with a blue, striped bedsheet from the pumpstation's sleeping quarters. A slightly sweet, ammonia-laden organic scent hung over the bodies, and the cloth over each's throat was soaked with blood or some other organic seepage.

She couldn't help but stare.

Mariam scampered around them and made her way back to the break room.

Kewryn had put chicken wire over all the vents and doorways of the changing room, and fallen asleep on a bed he'd moved into it, and Mariam was just supposed to... watch him sleep... or something.

She wasn't going to do that. He was a man. She couldn't trust him. She KNEW he was staring at her behind his back, the fucking pervert that he was, obsessed with playing nice and trying to get her to strip out of her clothes for his amusement.

Mariam wasn't fit. She had hated gym class, back when she was in school, and mostly ate junk food and had never once jumped or broken into a jog in the past ten years and didn't own a pair of sneakers or boots, only sliders and high heels, and only ever ate junk food.

She wasn't educated

Mariam, however, was afraid. She was afraid of men in elevators and not losing weight and failing to keep up with trends enough and her acne coming back and of running out of shows to binge and of paying taxes and of the cracks growing in her phone screen and of penises and of being turned into a victim by one.

And Mariam carried that fear in every step she took.

A short-statured man stepped down the steel stairwell, eddies of snowcurrents whorling in the air in his wake as he descended, manifesting from the harsh backlight of industrial floodlamps

beyond the stairwell. He had pristine white, short hair, and wore a suit, and seemed ageless—anywhere between the ages of 16 and 40.

His hands, which he had kept in his pockets as he walked, came up to adjust the baby-blue tie around his neck as he surveyed the interior of the pumpstation with a detached air, as if it wasn't real, or he wasn't actually there, or both, somehow.

He didn't look at Mariam when he spoke. "Are you a Peratek employee?"

"Y-Yes."

"Show me your identification card."

Floating scenes

"I had a hookah. When I was younger."

"Did you now?"

Mirza nodded, not that she could see. "I bought it in my early twenties. It was blue and red, beautiful swirled glass, and I would smoke from it and drink cheap iced tea with lemon and orange juice in it and watch soccer on a faded television."

Agent "Magdaline" continued walking for several steps, leaving Mirza to bask in the phantasmal warmth of his memories. Perhaps Mirza could, if he concentrated enough, summon the muggy warmth of the porch he had spent many afternoons on.

"I want to do that again," Mirza continued. "I want to smoke gravel tobacco from a hookah and drink cheap lemon tea and watch soccer."

Magdaline just gave him a glance from over her shoulder. "That's an enviable wish to have."

"If you could go back, would you?"

"I wouldn't," she replied, and walked five paces. "I was hungry as a kid. Hungry and poor. I fought with mice and the local fauna for offal."

"Offal..." Mirza echoed. "Offal?"

Magdaline said nothing. She was ashamed of her childhood. Ashamed of being poor, and ashamed of her parents for having eight kids, none of whom they had enough food for, and for stealing from the slum-bodegas she grew up around, and for scavenging, too, when she was sure nobody was around to see her rifling through the dumpsters and the odd roadkill and the occasional small animal that wasn't faster than her hands.

She was ashamed of desperation. Of being reduced to something subhuman.

"What about your heirloom? That ethnic dagger you keep at your back?"

Sandersfeld stared back for an offended moment. "This isn't an heirloom. It's from a flea market." He drew the Jile, the black iron blade singing against its wood-and-leather scabbard as it came free, and he offered it up. "It's still mine. Don't get dirt on my knife."

After Sandersfeld slits the bodyguard with a Jild

"Fuck, Sandersfeld. Where'd you pick up skills like that?"

After standing over the body for a moment to ensure it didn't stir, Sandersfeld planted a foot into the body's chest and heaved, dislodging his Jile. "I was in the military. We fought the bugs for X years."

"oh, right." Tinashe seemed unconvinced. "Did they teach you super sword karate before or after the no-eating-crayons speech in boot camp?"

The joke didn't seem to register with Sandersfeld, who just shook his head after he finished wiping down the curved blade. "Close battle doctrine. Bugs wouldn't always stay down if you shot them, so it was a fairly comprehensive course. Picked up the rest in the field."

"What is this, anyway?"

"Dunno. Some kinda powered suit."

"What do you mean, you don't know? You were in special forces, weren't you?"

"I was. Don't mean much. All special forces are is specialized infantry." Sandersfeld kicked it, watching the hydraulic components move as they compensated to absorb the force. "The only military units with hardware like this are engineering and logistics. Too expensive outside the private sector."

"Hey hey hey hey hey listen to me. You're listening? You need to focus on what's happening right now, okay? All the other shit, the slight you booked, that's after. You have to get through this."

"K-Kewryn, my leg feels hot! The wound is red!"

"That's just your body's natural reaction to an injury, you got bit deep."

He was just trying to lull her into a false sense of security. That's right. She knew she was dead. The infection would spread soon enough, and the only thing he was interested in was having *his* way

"T-thats not right."

Kewryn sighed. I can take a look at it if you'd like.

"No!" She clutched onto the pepper spray on her pocket just a bit tighter.

Kewryn I think one of them got me. My neck itches and I feel nauseous And i feel really sweaty

You don't seem sweaty

But I FEEL sweaty

Show me your collarbone

And the back of your neck

Mariam paused, turned around, and then bent over.

“The *back* of your neck”

“Hey, listen, there's a pump station not far from here, okay?”

Mariam watched, saying nothing, as a shape came up on Kewryn from the dark.

It had chitin.

Or

Kewryn whirled around, sweeping the beam of his flashlight over the pitch black banks of snow.

Far off in the din, the faint sheen of chitin claws glinted

“What's a stray?”

“A parasite at the social level. Parasitoid, I guess. They look and act like people until it suits them otherwise. The specifics are confidential and messy.”

The fact that Magdaline's has far more personal appeal than pay resurfaced clarion in Mirza's mind. He was careful to word his next sentence.

“Men like Dodson, your entry team, then...”

“Not always. It's biology; things are messy. A lot of strays are defective. Enough to live and die normally, exist in society, only rarely show up on scans.”

Mirza knew her well enough to ask the necessary next question. “Is there a third?”

“Others...” The agent seemed reflective for a moment, and then upset. On her face wasn’t anger, nor sadness, but a distinct third emotion. It was loathing. “Are only barely defective enough to justify being kept around. I’m not a bleeding heart. I pull my weight.”

Mirza had nothing useful he could say in response, so he just kept silent.

Or:

What does it have to do with peratek

Lets find out lol

“These strays, how do you deal with them?”

“Explosive rounds, center mass.”

Mirza seemed incredulous.

“No, really. Rifle round aren't always immediately lethal enough.”

“What if it has body armor?”

“Aim for the groin and thighs.”

“What if it has legs and body armor?”

She seemed daunted by the prospect

“Pray.”

Notes on Corporate Mercenaries

Landon, Sykes— First and foremost a genuinely good leader. If he survives long enough he'll be an amazing fucking elementary school gym coach. Has some issues between his loyalty to the company and his loyalty to his squad as a sort of middle agent between the two. Definitely sort of showy, demonstrates more bravado than he really experiences. In forties(?). If he isn't a dad, he will be one very soon. His kids will be very confused when they find out he was a high-level operator.

Sheridan— she's a ginger under the helmet. Good professional, in thirties. Started mercenary work *immediately* after her 4-year enlistment period in the military. In the squad, she's probably still feeling out the level of professionalism/interaction dynamics between the longer-standing members. Kind of lonely, but tries not to let it show or get to her— spends most of her money on vacations. She probably wants to date, but has issues finding someone who isn't immediately turned away by her career/frequency of travel. Dudes who wouldn't be are *not* good prospects and she had a bad same-sex fling in highschool that soured the whole experience for her. You'll find someone someday, Sheridan. If you survive long enough for your age to force a career change :^)

Damien Sandersfeld— pre-existing character who wound his way up into this story, I'll keep his character notes relevant. Yes he is a Stray. He shot a whole hell of a lot of bugs in the military and then worked as a policeman for some time. Could very easily be the leader of his own squad, but he's a new hire, so he has to be proven. Signed up for personal reasons, will stop working as a corporate mercenary very soon. This is going to make Sykes sad, since he'd love to be drinking/pool buddies with Damien. The feeling isn't very mutual. No offense, Sykes, it's just not like that. Damien is far too reserved to say this so I have to.

Daniels— Big Man. He likes his machine gun just a little bit *too* much. Daniels isn't, like, a maniac or a psychopath, but he's absolutely detached from violence in a way that's not typical or healthy. It serves him well in his line of work, though. He has a *lot* of potted plants he keeps and gardens, just as a hobby, to the point he makes money selling excess seedlings. Will probably stay a mercenary until he's severely injured or killed.

Tinashe— She tries to be goofy and silly. Like, actively tries. Keeps her hair in pigtails. Probably hosted a videogame server for her friends on an old computer in highschool, went to trade school for soldering. Learning welding as a backup means of employment when she isn't in the field. Is of central african descent, but most of her ancestors were white collar.

Daniels and Tinashe *are* together. Daniels does like Tinashe, but I don't think it's at the same level that she's interested in him, and their relationship probably isn't going to last. It's going to hit Tinashe really hard, even though she'll initiate it, but Daniels won't really notice much of a change. She'll be mad over this fact for a while.

Veitbac TDM— the sort of connection between the Spooks and the corporate mercenaries. Not happy about either of the parties, especially how little information is offered, but doesn't really have the resources to stand up for themselves. Probably the only side that's actually Good, even if they're sort of just there.

Notes on Spooks

Yvette Artier— Like Damien, another well-established character who shows up. She has hell a self-loathing issues and a lot to prove, mostly to herself. Unfortunately for Mirza, he's an excellent surface to project her self-loathing onto.

Dodson— He's british, and not that wise. He likes to see how far he can provoke Strays before they turn violent. Probably worked for Yvette once or twice and knows her as "that raging lady who you can't ask about being a Stray even if she is a Stray trust me on this one bruv it won't end well". Sort of doesn't respect Yvette, but values his own job well enough to be aware of this fact and actively compensate for it. Attempts to, at least. Unlike a lot of Liquidators, he likes his job, and isn't in it for revenge. He's just violent like that.

Notes on Survivors

Mariam— when she was alive she was probably a very gaunt, nervous woman. Definitely had a mental break and died as a result. Had blonde hair. Probably was high-key obsessively freaked out about stranger danger/possibly getting sexually assaulted, got bit at some point earlier because she didn't want to use too much pepper spray on the dogs. I just don't think she had the mindset/willpower to function more than "barely" in an emergency situation.

Kewryn— was a techie, and the most resourceful of the group. Had very good prospects to survive but got shit luck. After Stella had the idea to make spears, it was probably his experience and handiwork that actually got the spears fashioned. Was probably the kind of guy to have a tray of hard candy in his car.

Stella— not super happy with her name, is the child of a painter and a musician, who thought it was the coolest thing. Probably was a comic book Nerd Girl as a kid. Probably super embarrassed about this fact. She's "good" at armed combat, but her muscle memory is based around the opponent following rules. Both of the sportsmanly and biological variety.

Cyrus— sort of just a guy who's coasting, both in life and through the disaster. Not unintelligent but he probably doesn't do a ton of thinking, still extremely mathematically smart. Goes to the gym religiously but is somehow not a gym bro.

Emil— Emil's an asshole, and his attitude, while learned, is part of the reason why breakouts are universally fucking *violent* at PeraTek. Like everybody else, he just wants to survive. Absolutely does not see any possible error or wrong in his ways. Considers what he does to be necessary— it is, to an extent— but is unfortunately, again, an asshole about it. He's not *meant* to be a villain, but in this case, he is.

I like to imagine that, after he dies, his hell will be just sitting through two weeks of back-to-back HR corporate sensitivity meetings. No this is not canon.

Mirza— Wouldn't you like to know :)

Joking aside, despite being largely enigmatic there are consistent traits Mirza exhibits. Is quiet, especially if the alternative is being impolite, and really just wants to keep his head down and get through this. What he'll do if he does is anyone's guess. Is of mostly persian descent. Likes savory foods. Smokes, but only leaf tobacco mixed with aromatic herbs on a semi-annual basis. No he wasn't allowed to do this at PeraTek.

The Director's bodyguard

The director's bodyguard is an example of an extremely modified human wearing ultraheavy armor. In terms of lethality relative to the setting, they were not the absolute deadliest, but are in the arctic circle. In order to work in this story, their threat level and capabilities have to be decided prior to writing.

Their spine, femurs, pelvis, and skull are all a bulletproof alloy. Their ribs, radius and ulna, shoulderblades, and humerus are reinforced with this material. 5.56 could definitely score it, but could only **penetrate** the skull at a perpendicular angle. This would still probably kill them if they were naked. The shoulders, neck, forearms, upper chest, and gut have subdermal weave, enough to stop 9mm hollow point from penetrating and providing excellent cut resistance.

They have synthetic muscles in the biceps, deltoids, pectorals, forearms, calves, and thighs. They are also in extremely fit physical condition, though probably don't have the best cardio. This doesn't really matter.

Their uniform and exoframe have optical camouflage. This is damaged by the time current events roll around, but still makes them hard to track. Their eyes have light amplification and infrared. They have LIDAR.

They have a small, 8-inch blade hidden in their left arm, and a 10-shot pistol in their right arm. It's loaded with a carry caliber, comparable to 30 super carry, 22 WMR, or 5.7. It doesn't have very many rounds left by the time current events take place. There are other utility attachments in the left hand, though all of the mechanisms are jammed, rendering the hand into a slightly shitty claw.

The director's bodyguard also has a combat exoframe on, which they would've equipped when shit started to hit the fan. It isn't power armor, but offers good LVL 1 protection from a flexible synthetic cloth woven into the joints. The pneumatics offer their own excellent, though unreliable protection.

The exoframe is equipped with lvl 4 ceramic plates. This is a "full" set of ballistic armor: protection for the heart and lungs, side plates, shoulder plates, pelvic and thigh plates. A good number of these panels are shot out by now. The exoframe also has thick LVL 3a protection for the neck and gut. A full facial helmet is worn with the exoframe, though the front of this is torn off.

Similar to Half Kife's HEV suit, the exoframe is equipped with an automated medical system that will keep them full of delicious drugs. This is how the spooks and corporate mercenaries wind up running into them: they were following the vital data monitored by this system. The exoframe's AI is stuck in speak-aloud mode.

The exoframe includes a shoulder-mounted shotgun, on the left side of the body, and folding, 18-inch CQC blades; two on the left and one on the right. When commissioning the exoframe, the director understood that their bodyguard might have to engage in dangerous physical confrontations. This is bad news for everyone right now.

The Director's bodyguard has been totally compromised by a parasite in their central nervous system, and only retains the ability for animalistic thought. This has not affected their drilled reflexes.