



Jumping the Shark

I.

Eddie Velasquez heard the squeal of a half-assed coffeemaker behind him, churning out a half-assed pot of coffee through its half-assed innards. What was it about the Epdin hierarchy that he found so crummy, anyway? The thing was supposed to be a bureaucratic utopia— a lovely melding of the hard-nosed military and the dewy-eyed civvies; the best of both worlds coming together into a wonderful new form.

But as it turned out that new form— like a broken sculpture— only had half-an-ass on it.

0800 hours came and passed. As promised, Earth soon dominated the view outside.

The good 'ol Blue Marble. Hi, there: 'ya old pissar.

Eddie wondered why people still called it the 'Blue Marble'. It certainly *wasn't* blue anymore, not from 700 miles up, at least.

I guess the phrase 'Skanky-Pink-Amethyst' just doesn't have the ring to it.

That wasn't true: Eddie didn't have to wonder about the name. He stared down at his fedora, lying on the sleek white desk before him: Eddie knew exactly why people still called the Earth by that rosy little name, even long after the oceans had turned to disgusting purple crud. They used old, saccharine phrases like that for the same reason Eddie wore that ratty brown fedora on his head: nostalgia, pure and simple. People, as an animistic mass, often prayed— in vain— for all the rosiest and nicest moments in the rosiest and nicest points in history to revisit them, as if by magic. And just maybe, they reason, if everyone grasps at the straws of the past— even something as trivial as a now-ironic name for their own planet— maybe then that magic would somehow take hold.

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Everyone is down by the bonds of nostalgia, to one extent or another, but Eddie Velasquez's nostalgia is a wholly different animal.

The square-jawed, whiskered Velasquez didn't look back to an easier way of life: he was enamored of nit, and grit, and the seedier years of humanity. He was in love with the good old *noir* of the world's dark past: the days before shape-shifting alien aggressors and the hyper-militarization of the world.

The reels in Eddie's head spun to the tune of a gritty little film noir, or even a nice cyberpunk flick, maybe. But today the world lived under the aegis of a detestable military dictatorship, kept in check by the shadow of an even greater threat outside its own borders.

Instead of film noir— or even cyberpunk— all I get is a bad 'Casablanca' remake.

The sleek, polished doorway beside the panoramic window hissed open. In stepped a mousey little man, complete with a small handlebar moustache and immaculately-combed hair: a futile attempt to conceal his receding hairline.

"Good morning, Colonel." The man gestured magnanimously in the direction of the man standing behind Eddie: Colonel Sabre. This relatively young man only proved Eddie's assessment of Epidin as 'half-assed': he could almost *feel* the contempt the Colonel bore his civilian counterpart even before he opened his mouth.

"Executor." Colonel Sabre nodded in a very *un*-magnanimous way.

The Chief Executor walked across the room and sat down opposite Velasquez in a big cushy chair at the head of his massive desk. Everything in the CE's office reeked of creature-comforts and hominess, despite the abundance of cold, polished steel around them. His massive panorama-window, while extraordinarily beautiful, held no strategic or tactical advantage at all: any AM officer would replace it with more cold, polished steel in a heartbeat. So, all in all, this wasn't the office of a military man.

More like the office of a half-assed military-civilian hybrid.

"Ah, Mister Velasquez..." The mousey man extended a hand across the table, but stopped as his eyes fell upon the big, ugly firearm lying across his pretty silver desk. The oversized weapon was scarred with chips and flakes of dirt.

"He insisted on taking that up with us." Colonel Sabre explained. Eddie could feel the Colonel's eyes rolling behind him.

The CE looked slightly put-off, more concerned about the finish on his desk than having a live-weapon in his office.

"No matter: no matter at all." He shook Eddie's hand, a phony smile plastered on his milquetoast face. "Welcome to Satellite Alpha. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mister Velasquez."

"An' I you." Eddie lied.

"You're likely very curious about the summons, I gather?"

"I'm more curious about seeing three of my competitors out in the hall back there." Eddie pointed with his thumb and scowled.

"Yes, well: we're kind of putting out an open invitation for the best-and-brightest in the business, you see..."

"Best-and-brightest." Eddie looked over his shoulder at Sabre. In a further display of absolute rudeness, he addressed the Colonel instead of the CE. "That would be the Allied Military Investigative Branch, wouldn't it? If you wanna 'investigate' something,

they're the way to go, ain't they? Not to downplay my credentials, but I figure that you boys up here would have access to the big guns, right?"

The CE motioned to the door he entered through. "Actually, I just came from an exhaustive meeting with a delegation from the Allied Commanders, as well as the MIB."

"And 'ya still want to meet with a li'l old private dick like me, huh?"

"We need men of— how should I put it?— 'unique' resourcefulness."

Colonel Sabre, who appeared quite amused by Velazquez's informality, provided the answer. "We're slumming it, friend: giving our job to as many private investigators as possible. We figure that if we piss hard enough into the wind, we might just get the answers we're looking for." He answered Velazquez's frankness with his own frankness' Eddie appreciated the gesture, and reciprocated with a half-warm smile.

"And what answers would those be?" Eddie faced forward again and addressed the Chief Executor.

The CE folded his hands on the desk, his eyes more serious. Behind him the sun receded under the massive shadow of the Blue Marble. The pillars and columns of the Perimeter-Defense Network shone through that darkness with their own tinny lights: a series of shining wires in space.

"Do you remember what happened up here two months ago during the last Bydo incarnation-wave assault?"

"Yes, I do. That system failure of yours: the accident."

For a mousey little man, the CE's pale eyes could burn like hot coals when he wanted them to, and they did so now.

"No, Mister Velazquez. It's more like the accident that *wasn't* an accident." He drew these words out very slowly. "More bluntly: the 'accident' that was, in fact, sabotage."

Eddie Velazquez let this revelation sink in. Then he leaned forward, slightly more interested in hearing the CE out.

II.

"...the rest, as they say, is history." The Executor savored another sip of his gourmet coffee.

"And it's history that someone *else* saw fit to make happen." Colonel Sabre chimed in. "10,000 civilians on the ground paid the price for that history." The Colonel's voice was almost indignant: he was a hardened military man, but had a strong sense of justice about him, and a youthful idealism that had yet to be beaten out of him. Part of that was due to his separation from the rest of the Allied Military, being shuttled off to jointly run the Epdin setup, kicked out of the slow-moving grandeur of the AM's 'ocean' for the fast-moving 'tributary' of Epdin Command: he'd risen through the ranks lightning-fast, but sat in a position of little prestige compared to his Academy comrades, all of whom he now outranked, but none of whom considered him superior, given his 'tainted' relationship with the civvys up here.

Velasquez was unconvinced. "You haven't got any evidence of this computer virus, though: do you?"

"It wiped all the data banks of our affected systems clean, so no, we do not." the CE admitted.

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“But we *do* have the initiator signal—”

“Colonel!” The CE nearly leapt from his chair; this was the first genuine emotional display he’d given that wasn’t premeditated. Eddie appeared intrigued by it.

“What: aren’t we going to put him on the job, too?” Sabre found himself taking a shine to this pond-scum investigator. He was certainly a rat in their gilded palace, so to speak, but there was something in Eddie Velasquez’s sarcasm and casual aloofness that impressed the Colonel.

The CE sat down again. “Alright: so be it. I’ll cut to the point, Mister Velasquez. The job offer is simple—”

“You should know: I charge a £€ 5,000 retainer, then £€-500 a day plus expenses.”

“We happen to know that you charge £€-250 a day, and that you take *no* retainer.” The CE smiled. “Your competitors don’t have much to say about you, except to point out your bargain-basement rates.”

“Guess it’s ‘cause I ain’t much of an investigator, huh? Well, why don’t we compromise and settle on, oh, let’s say six boxes of Haddon cigars a day? That’d work out to about £€ 300, right?” Eddie looked back at Sabre and smirked. “How’s that sound to you, Schimitar?”

Sabre returned the smirk: this old boy wasn’t playing serious at all. He fished a cigar out of his coat pocket and put it on the table. “That’s a genuine Caribe. Think of it as a carrot for the mule: I’d advise you to stick around for a minute, and be a little more serious. When you hear our offer, I think you’ll be more than motivated.”

“And what *is* the offer?” Eddie snatched up the cigar and stuck it between his gums. His eyes clouded with pleasure at the mere taste of the superior tobacco blend.

“We’re offering you absolutely nothing.” The CE smiled.

“Tempting.”

“That’s if you don’t find anything.”

“And if I do?”

The CE leaned forward again. “Mister Velasquez: let me begin by telling you about that carrier signal we received.”

“The one that set your little virus off?” Eddie shrugged. “I’ve got a few techie contacts that could help me track something like that down, but still: the MIB would serve y’all a lot better.”

“The signal cut through our defense grid like a knife through melted butter: it had all the system codes and protocols memorized and ready-to-go. That information is *classified*.” The Chief Executor sat back again. “There’s only one conclusion we can reach about that signal: it was sent by, or on behalf of, someone in the military hierarchy.”

Eddie leaned back and crossed his arms. Sabre noted that he didn’t start, didn’t whistle with surprise: he appeared indifferent to this massive bombshell tossed in his lap.

He’s either an ice-cold customer, or an idiot...

The scraggly man brushed a hand through his ratty black hair. “Me, oh my.” He looked towards the door the CE used earlier: the room where he’d met the brass. “This little soiree isn’t an Allied Military show at all: is it?”

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“No, sir.” The CE shook his head. “The man who discovers the source of that transmission, and the people responsible for sending it, gets £50,000, guaranteed from the Epdin Raising Committee.”

“The ERC, huh?”

“It’s a wholly civilian organization.” Sabre explained.

“And one of the more influential ones, at that. Listen, Mister Velasquez: it’s no secret that the Allied Military has issues with the Epdin setup. Some of them have *major* issues, too, given our massive operating costs.” The Executor explained.

“Yeah, yeah: the ‘budgetary ballet’ between the spiders ‘n the sharks; I know all that.” Velasquez waved the cigar through the air.

“Mmm.” The CE leaned back in his chair. “Do you know what the main goal of our humble little network is? I mean: if you could sum it up in one word or so?”

“Grill it ‘n kill it.” Velasquez smiled. The awe-inspiring, star-like power of the network was legendary. After all it is, by far, the most powerful single device ever built in human history.

The CE wagged his finger. “Yes, yes: death is a part of it— causing all those incarnations to die— but the word that best describes Epdin is ‘*live*’.” He motioned to Velasquez’s cigar. “Take that expensive little ‘death-stick’ you’re holding there: it’s coated with sticky tar and has about twenty carcinogens in it, right?”

“I’d say that’s about right.”

“So why on Earth do you smoke it?”

Eddie scoffed. “C’mon, ‘Cee-Eee’!” He waved the cigar through the air again. “The ‘Provirus’ makes this kinda thing friggin’ harmless.”

“Ah, the ‘Provirus’. And every one of us gets injected with the Provirus in grade school, correct? That’s a direct product of military research during our first few encounters with the Bydo, you know. Just like the ‘cancer-eaters’ you’d be injected with if your body ever *were* damaged by the smoke. That’s from military research, too.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that the AM wouldn’t hesitate to hold an absolute monopoly on *all* this technology if it could. In a lot of ways it already has that monopoly. Back in ’69 the Bydo caught us totally off guard. Sure, we nuked them into oblivion, and for our effort we got a massive desert on our hands that we call the ‘Dead-Lands’, plus we were nearly annihilated, as well. When all was set and done the human race was set back a decade or so, technologically. Then came the Cataclysm: the False-Moon fell, and that set us back— what?— a good 50 years, and left us with a population problem we’re still struggling with. Did you know that the bean counters over at the Human Reintroduction Project *still* can’t confirm any meaningful population growth, even over in New Europe? But I’m getting off topic: so now we’re getting back up there, technologically speaking. We’ve got extraordinary advances in spacecraft design, propulsion, medical prosthetics, human-computer interfaces, and who knows what else? We’re further along in all these fields than we’ve even been before. And, yet, these are all military-dominated projects, aren’t they? Your average *civilian* is relegated to using outdated personal computers, crude fuel-cell engines, and *metal* prosthetics: technology we should have tossed-out decades ago.”

“Yup: the good ol’ military-civilian gap. Tch! So you really believe it’s ‘1984’, don’ you? Well, I’ll be the first to say that it *feels* like I’ve got a boot stamping on my poor ol’ human face.”

“But—in my opinion—the worst part is their justification. For example: how many civilians do you think have been killed by Bydo incarnations on the ground? Epdin is *not* infallible, after all. Tens of thousands of bogeys have made it through in our history. Likely *hundreds* of thousands, and all since that marvelous Provirus was released. That means the Bydo have had ample experience detecting and working around that little countermeasure: it’s now *useless* to the AM as a genetic defense against Bydo cells, but we civvys couldn’t imagine life without it.”

“I don’t imagine we could.”

“But *if* they’d kept it under wraps and only given the Provirus to soldiers and military pilots, who knows: it might still be an effective deterrent, even today.” The Executor sat back. “But it *was* distributed to the public, Mister Velasquez, because Earth still has a human population, however small, and because *organized* civilian life does go on, and if we hadn’t been given that little *scrap* of technology, there would have likely been riots. Humans, as a species, can probably live with or without Epdin, but *humanity* goes on only because there’s a barrier between the Bydo Empire and the last vestiges of honest-to-goodness civilian life.”

“And, without your little web, there’d be no civvys at all.”

“Only a massive, all-encompassing military faction.”

“We’ve already got that, pal.” Eddie disagreed.

“Not quite yet. We’d be much closer to it without the network. There are certain ‘factions’ in the AM hierarchy that want victory against the Bydo Empire at *any* cost, you know. They don’t see Epdin as a shield for continued human life, but rather as a crutch for a way of life that is—in their view—past its time.”

“‘Cause it’s a brave new world, ain’t it?” Velasquez smiled. “So, there’s no AM involvement in your little investigation, here. You’re sneaking around behind the giant’s back, using a li’l civvy organization as a shield for your unauthorized investigations?”

“Don’t expect the Epdin Raising Committee to be a shield for you.” Sabre shook his head. “As a ‘hired gun’ you’d get no protection at all, really.”

“You would get *some*, at least.” The Executor appeared more defensive at these cloak-and-dagger actions. “Look, we’re only trying to use any and all available resources to get to the truth—“

“Bullshit.” Eddie growled as he chewed on the end of his luxury cigar. “You’re going right over the Military Investigative Branch altogether ‘case you wouldn’t trust them to piss in your face honestly: you wanna jump the shark and get right down into the mud personally, am I right?”

“We want to put *you* boys in the mud, Velasquez.” Sabre retorted.

Eddie turned to face the Colonel. “And what about you? You’re AM, right? Why are you so eager to bend one of your comrades over a desk, anyway? That’s assuming your phantom carrier signal *was* actually sent by a military boy or girl.”

“Our friend the Colonel is interested in the possible career-advancement opportunities presented by this situation.” The CE continued to provide diplomatic answers to every question.

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Sabre was more blunt. “The Superior Joint Command hates two things above all else: incompetence and treason, and we’ve got one or both of those, here. If I were involved in flushing a rat out of the AM hierarchy, well, that’s just the kind of thing that gets someone promoted to General, my friend.”

Eddie nodded, appreciating the logic. “I guess that depends on how high your rat is perched: if the Superior Joint Command *itself* were involved in that sabotage of yours, well, I guess you’d end up eating your own pistol, wouldn’t you, Rapier?”

“Sabre.” The Colonel scowled like a raven.

“I wouldn’t insult the illustrious Superior Joint Command like that in front of the Colonel.” The Executor cautioned. “After all, our Allied Military friends treat their precious SJC with an almost religious deference.”

Sabre gave the CE the same look, causing the civilian to toss his hands deferentially. “I worship at the same altar, of course. Anyway, it’s ludicrous to even consider *that* possibility, but facts are facts, and *someone* in the AM hierarchy knows something about our troubles, at least.”

“And, at the worst, they caused them.” Eddie nodded.

After a few minutes of haggling and talking, Eddie Velasquez accepted the job.

As much as Sabre admired the gruff man’s demeanor and his pain-spoken manner he knew the flakey private eye was little more than cannon-fodder. They *were* slumming it, as far as this wetworks operation went: the ERC was sending hundreds of imbecilic and—in many cases—mentally unbalanced ‘private investigators’ out in the hopes that just one or two might happen to be of *some* use. Eddie Velasquez was just another bullet fired from their unsighted ‘machinegun’.

Just another pathetic shark in the water, thrown in with a whole bunch of other sharks, too.

The odds of this pitiable specimen doing anything worthwhile were slim-to-none. He’d have to jump ahead of the whole pack of private dicks to be of any use.

The Colonel poured himself some coffee after Velasquez left.

“Scum every which way!” The CE lamented as he leaned back at his desk. “I simply don’t believe we can get *any* decent work out of the lot of them.”

“Could you smell it on his breath, too?”

“The *Redux*, you mean? Ugh, how could I miss it? Filthy habit! When do you think he last used, anyway?”

“Today, I’ll bet.” Sabre scoffed. “Yes, that man was one of the worst, yet. But so what? The money is too good to pass-up, and you figure that if we send enough desperate wackos out there someone will stumble upon something. It’s not like we have many options available. In a way it’s kind of funny: this is our version of a Bydo incarnation-wave assault, isn’t it?” The Colonel turned on his heels and walked to the door. He stopped. “Still, that guy was a real pisser, wasn’t he? Didn’t even flinch when we explained the situation to him. I wonder how someone gets their nerves to just shrivel-up and die like that.”

The Chief Executor shuffled paperwork on his desk. “Oh, that’s not hard to fathom: I picked up his docket from the Metro Police. Apparently his young daughter was killed, and right before his eyes, as I understand it.”

Sabre looked back at the CE, his jaw clenched.

“Had her face blown apart by a shotgun slug.” The Executor shook his head, then returned to his paperwork.

III.

Senegal Kröterohr gazed out a porthole and watched the retreating sun as it fell behind the Earth. He was on the highest level of one of Satellite Alpha’s six main pylons.

“Quite a view, ain’t it?”

“Mmm.” Kröterohr acknowledged the voice behind him with scant civility. There was a touch of ice in his voice, as well. The Allied Commanders were running the poor undersecretary ragged with all the hubbub involved in arranging this ‘fact-finding’ mission to Epdin, and he was loathe to be bothered by someone at the moment.

The man behind him persisted, however.

“Clear out there today, too: no dust or nothing. Days like this a guy almost thinks they can see all the way to the heliosheath, huh? Heck, if you had a scope you might even see good ol’ Voyager I dancing through the darkness out there, eh, secretary-man?”

“If you say so.” Kröterohr growled: this nonsense was most unwelcome. Any more ‘friendly’ banter and he would tell this rube where he could stick his Voyager.

“Yeah, I remember that ol’ bucket of bolts out there: who could forget? And that pretty little record they put onboard— you know, ‘Tunes from Earth’, or whatever. Something to entertain the little green men out there.” He chuckled. “Unfortunately for us, the Bydo don’t seem to grasp the concept of the phonograph!”

“Let me tell you where you can stick your phonograph, *dummkopf*...” Kröterohr turned to face the pest, but was instantly thrown off-guard by the young man’s ear-to-ear grin. The pest leaned closer to him and whispered:

“You know, secretary-man: of all the tunes they put on that Golden Record, my favorite’s *gotta* be ‘Johnny B. Goode.’”

Kröterohr’s toad-like eyes bulged in their pouchy orbits.

Still grinning like a devil, he leaned even closer. “Don’t you agree, ‘Johnny’?”

The undersecretary took a step back. He said nothing, but scanned the brash man with heightened interest. Then he looked up and down the hall: there was no one else in sight.

“If you’re wondering, mister secretary-man, I’m—”

“—Joe Montana.” Kröterohr hissed, irate. “Your reputation comes before you.”

“Or it *precedes* me, Senegal: whichever floats your boat.” The man nodded. He smiled coquettishly and held-up his left wrist: a silver bracelet resided on his arm, engraved with the ominous heart-and-teardrop design.

“What in the name of *Gott* are you doing here?”

“Come on, Senegal: aren’t we gonna say ‘T.I.A.’, and everything like that? Procedures are procedures, right?” He looked like a little league player that was just denied his pizza after the ballgame, or a boy who’d just been refused a ‘spit-on-it’ handshake.

Kröterohr grabbed the man’s uniform collar. The cad was wearing an Epdin-issue maintenance suit, stolen from God knows where. Kröterohr’s own silver bracelet flashed in the flood lights as he dragged the upstart youth to a dark corner.

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“You like ‘procedure’, idiot? Well, procedure says that you shouldn’t even know who the hell *I* am!”

Joe Montana smiled again. “Well, if it makes you feel any better: my name is Christoph-”

“I don’t want to know *your* name, either!”

“Fine, but you should remember: the rules say that no Committee *operatives* should know the identity of their *runners*: I don’t see a problem with a couple of ‘runners’ knowing each other’s names. And, heck, it’s not like it was that hard to find you, anyway.” Montana inspected his nails, still smirking, “I mean, c’mon: Senegal Kröterohr: ‘Undersecretary of Operations for the Union of Allied Commanders?’ It’s the perfect job title: enough presence to be influential— if only a bit— but not enough to be conspicuous: you’re a shadow behind the seat ‘o power, baby! And you’re the perfect ‘runner’ for our Mu—”

This time Montana *did* show some common sense: he looked up and down the corridor before finishing his sentence.

“—and you’re the perfect ‘runner’ for our Mutual Acquaintance.”

“What of it? Oh, don’t tell me you want to talk to *him*?” Kröterohr shook his head. “You cannot be that suicidal...”

“Not at all, ‘Johnny Unitas’, but I do need to have a word with the *other* end of your pipeline: I gotta communicate with the Aryl-man himself, Sven Wraith.”

Kröterohr ground his teeth, bothered to no end by this brash fool’s disregard of protocol, but he was curious about his motives. In any event, it was his duty to the Project to keep his eyes and ears open to anything that might affect Antipathy.

And, from what he’d seen so far, this foolish ‘Joe Montana’— with his reckless disregard for all protocols and propriety— had the potential to ‘affect’ Antipathy just as a hurricane ‘affects’ a costal settlement.

“This way.” The undersecretary barked like a dog.

IV.

“...so our little chick-a-dee makes a round trip through the core, and then *boom!*” Joe Montana clapped his hands like a toy monkey clanking cymbals together.

“‘Boom’.” Kröterohr mumbled. “‘Boom?’ ‘Boom’: what, idiot?”

Montana’s body glistened in the white maintenance uniform. He sat in one of the plush chairs of the now-empty first level conference room. “I dunno, exactly. Science isn’t really my strong suit. At least, not *this* kinda science.”

“Dunno?” Kröterohr rolled the word mockingly. “You’re Doctor Alletalen’s runner, for God’s sake, Montana!”

“Well, we know that things didn’t go *exactly* as planned.”

“An understatement.” Kröterohr sat perched upon the table, his leg up on one of the chairs. In his midnight-black vestments he was nearly invisible under the dim lights.

“And a few high-powered probes sent out by the *Onychophage* tell us that the internal temperature of the Mass spiked to around 5,000 K right before the surface matter was ejected.”

“Hot as the surface of the Sun, was it? The Mass was likely trying to disinfect itself. At that high temperature there’s no way Antipathy could survive. Tch! Even if it

did, the Core got vaporized ten seconds later and became useless for our purposes. Yes, yes: I'm aware of the failure of our little 'Prototype Test', Montana: it's *old* news, now."

"Failure? Probably, but there's something that ain't being broadcast to all the brass yet: the Mass's superstructure went the way of the dodo, to be sure, but the docs at Bydo Labs think the Core may have skimmed out just before the 'big bang'."

The undersecretary's eyes shot open. "*Sie scherzen!*" He rubbed his stubby hands together in a brisk motion. "Then we may well have planted the seed after all?" But then his face fell. "No, Mister Montana, you're a liar: no one detected any transdimensional shifts during the operation." Kröterohr shook his head, sullen.

"That's 'cause they were looking for a shift from Dimension 1 to Dimension 26, weren't they?" Montana smirked knowingly.

"Yes, to the Bydo homeland, and the Great Communion; where else would it go?"

"Look, from what we could tell the Core went *all* wonky."

"Wonky?"

"Well, I dunno *what* our little Milkmaid's ship did to the Core, but we think it ended-up skimming out to Dimension 7."

"Dimension 7?" The undersecretary scratched his chin as he looked down at his black shoes. "The 'Burning-Heavens' Lands? What madness could've driven it there?"

"Maybe Bydo Cores don't work too well when they're boiling away at 5,000 degrees Kelvin, you think?"

"Our equivalent of heat stroke? In any event, if it really did end up out there, it's certainly out of our sphere of influence isn't it?"

"Seems so. Unless it finds a way back, somehow. But, look: the Committee is really, really, really, well... pissed about everything."

"I am, too."

"Pissed enough to delay the second and third trials." Montana leaned forward. "I was in with Doctor Alletalen the other day, and he was flaking like a scab."

"Hard to believe. Alletalen is a standup Committee member, all the way."

Kröterohr scrunched his face. "At least, from what I know of him. Was he upset by anything else going on?"

"Not that I could see. I'd brought him the latest files from Uriah. It was routine stuff, that's all, and he just up and flaked."

"Files?"

"The classified personnel records for our Perfect Fifth: the 'Diapente Test' subject. Alletalen seemed kinda, well, upset about a lot of things over the past few weeks, but when he opened that folder, I dunno—"

"Stop saying that."

"I'm *un*-sure why, but it looked like he nearly broke down into tears. Heck, maybe he knows the Diapente Test subject or something—"

"Justin Storm? No, I doubt that very much. *No one* knows who Justin Storm is, and that's one of the reasons he was designated. Other than immediate family somewhere in the New World, he's got no one to cry at his funeral, or raise a stink about it."

"Among other things, right? Anyway, my point is this: you're likely to see the other tests scuttled, at least for the time being, unless we can do something about it."

Kröterohr looked at Montana with suspicion. "And just what would that be?"

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Montana smiled again. “Why don’t you go tell your amigo, the Aryl-man of Base-10, to shoot-up his other two pilots as soon as possible with that lovely brown sludge, huh?”

“And go right over the heads of our betters in the Committee?” Kröterohr scoffed.

“The Committee, well, they’re like a bunch of idiot— no, sorry, scratch that— *myopic* sharks, aren’t they? They only see what’s right in front of ‘em. They’ve got no vision: that’s their problem.”

“And then there’s you: you’ve never been that hawkish about the Project, have you? From what I’ve heard you’re more like a flunkey, just running around earning his keep. Why are you so gung-ho about Antipathy now that one of our tests failed, Montana?”

“Well, at least we had *some* effect on the Mass, right? Stands to reason that other tests should be successful, don’t you think, secretary-man?”

Kröterohr shook his head. “I’ll think about it. But there are still many unknown variables in the water, like the assault on our Prototype Test subject. I’ve got a team investigating the incident, but we still don’t know who attacked Pilot Chenine Chovert.”

“I bet you’re *very* close to the person responsible for that, Mister Senegal, even as we’re speakin’ here.” Montana grinned demonically.

The undersecretary’s wristwatch suddenly flashed with a steady stream of lights.

“The Senior General.” He murmured. “Looks like the Allied Commanders are ready to leave for Spindlespire Ridge. I have to go, now.” The toady man hopped off the table and made for the door.

“Fine by me: I’ve got somewhere to be soon, too. Oh, and Senegal?” Joe Montana called out in a sing-song cadence.

The undersecretary turned to face his fellow runner.

“What do we say, Senegal?”

“T.I.A.” Kröterohr replied, his teeth gnashed together.

“And you won’t forget it, right?”

“Never.” He agreed. The man left the room in a hurry, his short black cape trailing behind him, ruffling in the stale, recycled air of Satellite Alpha. The undersecretary braced himself to attend to the needs of his ‘illustrious’ Generals, just as a nanny would tend to her diaper-clad charges.

Though in her case, there’d be much less fecal matter to wade through, I think.

V.

Chair. Stool. Table.

Wooden table: sunny day.

Open window.

“Pretty fishies.” The child appraised.

Crayons. Drawing paper.

“Momma?”

“We have to go, Chenine.”

“Oh, why? Why: momma?!”

“To see mommy’s friend.”

“I don’t wanna! Daddy’s comin’ home, soon!”

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“Chenine!”

“Don’t wanna!”

“We have to go see momma’s friend.”

“*You* go meet the friend!”

Black crayon.

Snatch up.

Shapely, lavender-scented hands before her eyes.

Scribble-scribble-scribble-scribble-scribble—

“Momma!”

“*Now* we’re going to see mommy’s friend!”

Scratched-up paper falls to floor.

High-chair tips.

“*Fishies!* Why! Why: you’re a mean shark! M-m-mean ‘ol shark, momma!

You’re a ‘momma-shark!’ Momma-shark, momma-*shark!*”

Bawling.

Mommy sighs.

VI.

The water wasn’t really that warm. It wasn’t as warm as she thought it’d be, anyway. But the faucet still dripped. The wall tiles were still all foggy and steamy, too.

Splish-splash...

That smell.

That touch.

A grip on a naked eight-year-old clavicle.

Cherry, like her Crayolas.

Her eyes widened like marbles—

Chenine snapped back to reality with a gasp.

“I don’t care what you say: I *hate* Para-Para night!”

“Everyone’s out there doing the same thing! It’s like some kinda hick rodeo-dance, or something!”

“It’s lame! All that stupid arm-waving and stuff: you can’t even shake your hips around!”

“The challenge is to make the *other* parts of your body look desirable without relying on your hips.” Chenine sat in the backseat of the girls’ line-driver express, staring out the sleek glass window. The gaudy streetlights of the Great City greeted her. Two of her less-inebriated companions rode up front, while three other girls sat in the back with her.

The stone-cold sober girl sat with her chin propped-up in one hand. She was clad in her signature club-garb: tight white bellbottoms and a glittery cut-off top. The collar of Chenine’s shirt was stretched; the girl next to her absently licked at Chenine’s bare shoulder, groaning with indiscriminant pleasure ever so often; Chenine’s shoulder was sticky with her saliva. The other two backseat ladies were smack in the middle of a serious cuddle-session. All of this overly affectionate behavior wasn’t born out of any genuine sexual appeal so much as the huge quantities of *Animus* in each girl’s system: that designer club drug was enough to make almost anyone feel ‘cuddly’, and it was

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known to make females, especially, get a little ‘touchy-feely’ with anyone, regardless of gender.

All the ladies of the ‘Goo-Goo-Dolls’ were, basically, heterosexual, and Chenine knew that sexual desire had little to do with the drunken girls’ actions. All the same she resented the unwanted touching, as well as the blatant objectification she was forced to endure.

Sex, as well as ‘touchy-feely’ behavior, had its purposes for the Ketoni girl, but they were limited to keeping her lovers in line.

And in my bed... she noted.

It was, in a way, a tool she could use to overcome her own glaring flaws: a shield to deflect her lovers’ eyes from her own personal instability.

A shield, or a crutch, whatever you want to call it.

She wiped some sweat off her brow and looked outside again to get her bearings. The vehicle was traveling over dimly-lit terrain, between the dark bases of two unlit skyscrapers. These were damaged a month ago during the Battle for Nash Ultima (that was the civilian name for it: Chenine knew this fight as Operation ‘Spider’s Falter’). The lower levels of these behemoths were gutted by fire; construction crews worked intensely to make them habitable again.

Until that time, these buildings were nothing but empty shells.

“Cab-cab: halt.” She called.

“Don’t tell me you’re getting out here, Chen?” One of the pop-tarts up front asked. “There’s nothin’ around here.”

“Yeah. C’com: It’s all seedy, and really creepy, too.” Another girl noted.

“I’ve got a few errands to run, and anyway It’s a straight shot to my skyscraper from here. I’ll be fine.”

Chenine retrieved her tote bag from the trunk, then disembarked from the six-seater over the inebriated girls’ protests. The gull-wing doors automatically clamped shut behind her, then the line-driver whizzed off, the ground rails flashing beneath it as the cab shuttled down the street. The loud hum of its supplemental fuel cell engine decayed into a distant echo as the vehicle disappeared, not into darkness, but into the blaring light just around the corner.

It was cold tonight. The wind whipped between the two dark skyscrapers, kicking up dirt and debris as it whistled through. It was lonely here: empty and dark. The Ketoni girl shrugged off her momentary unease and made for the smaller of the dark towers.

She pattered up the lobby steps, ducking under several layers of ‘caution’ tape. Twenty powered-down Raisers sat on either side of the steps: two rows of silent, metallic construction bots. Her high heels echoed on scorched marble as she tromped up the decrepit stairs; this area used to be the second-level mezzanine, complete with elegant ceiling-to-floor windows, but now the charred husk was fully exposed to the cold night air. Chenine held her arms over her stomach, clutching the tote bag to her chest. Her arm hairs stood erect.

Finally she came around to a bank of elevators, silently awaiting passengers that might never come again.

How would it feel to have been caught in one of those during the firefight?

Chenine didn’t want to think about it.

Jumping the Shark

Up here she was buffered from the wind by the large glass elevator stalks. The massive tubes wound up into the sky; how far they rose, and how intact they remained along the line, was anybody's guess. Beyond this was a dilapidated box office; beyond that, the theatre.

Chenine crept through the dark field of chair-backs, once covered with velvet trim, now little more than headstones in a field of charred rubble. The stage, far below her, glowed in bright moonlight, courtesy of a gigantic hole in the wall at stage left.

Almost like God himself set the stage for some kind of ballet, and the performance is just waiting to begin.

Chenine looked down at the moonlit stage with hunger in her eyes.

The pilot of the Platonic Love is the only person I know that believes in God. He's gullible enough to believe anything, though. I know that talk of an Almighty is nonsense, but if he does exist, well, I wouldn't want to disappoint him.

She kicked off her shoes and rushed up to the stage, sprinting headlong into the light. Her face sparkled with something she rarely, if ever, showed at Base-10: a big, sloppy, childlike grin. She pirouetted around chunks of sharp metal and debris with cat-like reflexes. The agile girl grabbed the front railing of the stage, flipped over the orchestra section, landed on the conductor's podium in a tight, compact crouch, then springboarded up and over the front stage lights, landing on the dusty wooden slats of the stage with a graceful thud of her bare feet.

The moonlight played off her soft sapphire eyes as Chenine danced back and forth across the stage. Within moments her body heated up, the coldness on her skin evaporated, and drops of glittering sweat flicked off her body. The pale girl was a shining top in the night; a playful nymph dancing around the ruined playground.

She spent herself within ten minutes and, with an undignified thump, planted her rear on the floorboards. Chenine splayed out on her back with one hand resting over her bare navel, which heaved up and down as she panted.

Tomorrow she'd walk right up to JG Tabris and give him a *big* old kiss, for no reason at all, just to provoke a reaction from him (and from everyone else, for that matter). What would the Ops crew think? What would the pilot of the *Love* think, for that matter?

Tch! I should do it right in front of him, too, just to make that half-male feel more uncomfortable.

In the back of her head, though, she still wondered: why did he refuse her 'proposition', even when he ventured into her apartment?

Well, who cares!

Why get so hung up on *him*? Chenine certainly wasn't, that's to be sure, but she just *knew* how fun it would be to make him uncomfortable like that.

Then there was the new woman: Captain Rayne.

She seemed upset by our unorthodox setup at Base-10.

What would the Captain do if Chenine showed up for work in cut-off khakis and a turquoise halter top, instead of the usual modest attire?

Well, let's find out

She groaned pleurably. Her body, sprawled on the stage, soaked up the moonlight as if she were a sunbather.

Sunbather...

Jumping the Shark

She should ask Aryl Wraith to put the TSS on standby at the Western Sahara Coast tomorrow.

Lots of sun, there.

She could pack her silver bikini, or even wear it under her flight suit.

Get a little bit of a tan.

Before all that, though, she would need to tend to her new roommate: a gruff rock-jock from the clubs (the only hindrance was his stubbled face: the guy wasn't in the habit of shaving regularly, and Chenine detested having to caress a scratchy chin). Another minor hindrance was the fact that the man assumed— for the moment— that their cohabitation was of a platonic, business-related nature (mainly, that neither of them could afford the apartment on their own). The guy assumed that he was just Chenine's 'friend'.

I'd say that a little gently 'prodding' might rob him of that misunderstanding.

Much as she detested the act itself, there was only one way to guarantee that she could keep her hooks in him.

By letting him put his hook in me...

Anyway: she liked him, all-in-all. He was strong, and had an excellent body to lie against at the end of the day. She clapped her hands in anticipation.

'Friend', indeed!

After Chenine finished up out here, she'd get to work on the guy.

"I Gotta go meet my 'friend'!"

She stopped panting, then sat up. Her brow was furrowed, and her sapphire eyes clouded over.

Gotta go meet my 'friend'...

That scheming; that impulsiveness; that cascade of raw *fantasy*.

You know this feeling all too well, don't you, you dumb pop-tart?

It was that mood, or more accurately that *phase*, so seductive to her, but so repugnant as well. She could jump into it without warning, God knew for how long.

But she could jump out of it as well: jump out if it, and even *skip* it altogether, provided she had the stuff to keep her in check.

She lay there, splayed on the floorboards, staring up through the hole in the wall. Her eyes scanned the vapid surface of the moon. The moon was a phantom, wasn't it? Shakespeare's Juliet was right when she called it 'inconsistent'. Its irregular cycles defied measurement. So little about it was interesting, or desirable: it was forsaken by the Earth, as if it weren't even there at all. And yet, through its influence the tides rose and ebbed, it pulled and distorted the Earth's magnetic fields, and it even painted the soothing darkness of quiet nights with a gaudy silver light. Even unseen, its effects were profound.

It's there, even when it is not there, making the peaceful turbulent, and the predictable irregular.

Chenine folded one arm over her eyes and brought her legs together. She lay there, in feline-like riposte, for several more minutes. Then she muttered:

"You stupid, promiscuous bitch."

God, how I hate you.

"Oh, come on, honeybunch: you might fool around a bit, but you're not that dumb: are you?"

Chenine bolted upright.

Jumping the Shark

“I wasn’t talking about myself. And *you’re* early.” She growled into the dark gallery.

Suddenly two strong arms grasped her shoulders from behind and pulled Chenine up to her feet. A stern-faced man with two big tattoos on either cheek held her up. Each tat was a different letter in a language she didn’t know; Chenine didn’t know what the tattoos meant, but she never have the interest to ask the man. His hard face was rife with scars and scratches; more than a few criss-crossed, too, forming a skillet pattern. He smelled of cheap cigarettes and mildew.

“C’mon, now, Equis,” A shorter man—the speaker— ascended the stage. “Li’l Chen here’s never given us trouble before, has she?”

Equis released the girl, only to spin her around and snatch-up her tote. He spilled the contents out on the stage: half-a-dozen foil-wrapped packages lay in a pile.

“Joule-Jewels...?” The shorter man read the labels.

“Military-grade rations.” Chenine muttered.

“Oh, yeah: ‘Double-J’s’: right? I’ve heard of those: taste like shit, but pump ‘ya full of calories, right? You’ve got a friggin’ week’s worth, here, don’t ya? Do they just give those away to everyone, or something?”

“Not exactly.”

Although they might as well, given the lack of security around the storerooms...

She folded her arms over her chest in a display of impatience. “And, again: you’re early.”

“Not as early as you, though, right?” The man smirked as he gently grasped Chenine’s shoulders, then slid his hands all the way down her body in a blatantly vulgar frisk. He spent much more time inspecting some areas than others.

“There, now: you’re clean, I see.”

“Not anymore, I don’t think.” She muttered.

“All part of the price of doing business with the magnificent Cristóbal, baby. But, hey, I’ve gotta admit, I’m a little surprised by you, li’l lady.” He drew out the word ‘lady’ sarcastically. Cristóbal produced a pill bottle, complete with a bogus white prescription label. “Most of the Ketoni I do business with are pretty delicate folk: they’ve got no tolerance for *nothin’*, you know.”

“The Keto Region is all vineyards and grasslands.” Chenine mumbled. “The people there are raised healthy, but don’t get a lot of challenges to their immune systems.”

Cristóbal guffawed and held the bottle up to his face. “But a frail li’l flower like you— and a Ketoni, to boot— upped to 500 milligrams of *this* junk?” He shook his head as he examined the near-anorexic girl. “Whatever.”

“And ‘this’ is nano-infused, *biologically*-activated Ellipsis, right?”

“Well, of course: Chen baby! Just like before: this’ll pass any basic drug test you can throw at it, so long as a person ain’t looking for it too hard. Hell, that’s what you’re paying for, right? Speaking of...” He palmed the bottle and cocked an eyebrow.

Equis, still standing behind Chenine, thrust a beat-up data pad in her face.

“Access your account, now.”

“What for?” She addressed Cristóbal, not the tattooed punk behind her. “I’ve got my chits...” She pulled a cash-transfer card from her breast pocket.

Jumping the Shark

The dealer shook his head. “Nah, baby: you’re in the big-time now. 500 milligram tablets of this stuff aren’t easy to come by, and I don’t care about the cash you’ve got *now*: I wanna know what kinda cash you’ll have next time, and the time after.” He shook the tablets in his hands

Chenine slid her fingers over the console with resignation. She called up her bank, and her account.

“You’re sitting on £€1,400 in your primary checking account and you expect to keep up payments on these?” Cristóbal rattled the bottle again. “Seems to me you’ve got a financing problem.”

Before he could even register the movement, Chenine snatched the pill bottle from his hand and stuffed it into her tote.

“Just take what I owe you, okay? I’ll be ready for next time, too.” Chenine shored up the straps of her bag and prepared to leave.

Cristóbal’s ‘business-casual’ demeanor changed in an instant: he grabbed the girl by the neck and pushed her all the way across the stage until she was up against the backboards.

“Let me be clear, my dear, about what happens to pretty little girls who don’t pay their bills.” His grip tightened.

Then Chenine ‘gripped’ Cristóbal, too, somewhere other than his neck. Her grip was much more gentle, however, and expertly applied.

“Hey, hey, hey.” She cooed seductively. “Even if I’m a few bills short *some* of the time, I bet we could reach an ongoing arrangement, somehow...” she trained the fingers of her free hand up the man’s chest, cutely ‘walking’ the digits like spider’s legs.

The dealer’s face reddened, despite his best efforts to counteract Chenine’s charms. She could tell that Cristóbal’s legs were on the verge of turning to Jell-o.

As it turned out, his *brain* turned to Jell-o, or at least part of it: Chenine emerged from the theatre £€ 800 poorer, but with the guarantee of another bottle of her precious ‘Ellipsis’ next month. ‘Till then, however, it would be Double-J rations noon and night, and she supposed that it wouldn’t hurt to turn down the heat in her apartment a bit.

Besides, that way I’ll have another excuse to try and ‘warm-up’ my platonic roommate.

Chenine traipsed down the charred steps of the lonely skyscraper. All in all she was content with her day. She was ready to tear herself apart with her own capriciousness: she was being pulled every which way.

But now she was safe, at least from herself, for the time being. After bedding her roomie, she’d be safe from economic devastation, too.

But to do that you need to be a kitten, not a panther.

And, with her chalky white ‘combat buddies’ in tow, that was at least possible for her to do, now.

