



# PART ONE:

## *On An Uneventful Morn*

*"The whole ugly affair began the way these things always do - with  
Opus in the vicinity..."*

—BLOOM COUNTY

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### **I: Labor Dispute**

ETA CARINAE VI  
9,000 LIGHT YEARS FROM EARTH  
MONDAY, MAY 10, 1999

Viewed from a distance, the sixth planet of the Eta Carinae star system looked much like any other life-bearing planet in the galaxy; blue oceans, white clouds, continents a mixture of greens and browns. Just another world out of the several billion wandering through the galaxy. If seen with the right kind of eyes, however, Eta Carinae VI was very different. Viewed through a filter capable of picking up magical energy, the planet outshone its parent star. Great bursts of mana shot out from the planet's surface and into the depths of interstellar space, connecting Eta Carinae VI to the rest of the galaxy like a gigantic spiderweb.

The inhabitants thought it was perfectly right and proper for the planet to be so magically active. After all, it was the home of the galaxy's true master race, who understood magic on a level no lesser being could possibly comprehend. The Lyran Empire did have standards to meet.

At the moment, however, the leadership of the Empire was in crisis. The High Mage had been tricked into an interdimensional void space some three years before, and only now had his students, the near-mythical Eighth Circle, managed to gather enough power and wisdom to attempt a rescue. The wisdom had been the

difficult part - the power was easily gained by the sacrifice of every available slave and servitor creature within a day's travel of the High Mage's citadel. Deep in the heart of the High Mage's citadel, a magic circle was marked out and the tools gathered. When the last servitor had been sacrificed, its life force poured into the proper glyphs for transport, the ritual began. A full dozen of the strongest Lyran mages began throwing their wills at the glyphs, seeking out their master's mind and bidding it return.

Hours passed. Three of the Circle overextended themselves and burst into flame, but the ritual continued. The central glyph pulsed with blue light and bulged unnaturally. It expanded, balloon-like, as the reserves of energy in the other glyphs were pulled away into the center. Another two Lyrans cried out as their life was sucked into the expanding glyph, crumbling into dust as the last of their power was drawn into the construct.

Finally, with a soundless explosion and a flash of light and terrible emotions, the glyph split open like an overripe fruit. In the second after the glyph burst and before the light faded, the chamber rocked with noise. It was part proper sound, part thought, part spell, and it radiated out until all Lyrans everywhere heard it.

## I. AM. FREE!

And with that declaration, Charn'El, High Mage of Lyra and self-appointed ruler of the known universe, lost consciousness and fell to the floor.

The Lyran mages gathered together around the figure slumped on the floor. None of them moved to help him; to actually *aid* the High Mage in a moment of weakness was potentially fatal. A few tense seconds later, Charn'El stirred and slowly levered himself off the floor. He pulled himself to a sitting position, then slowly came to his feet. The remaining Eighth Circle all bowed low in a gesture of respect.

"Great lord," said one of the Eighth, "we welcome you home."

Charn'El nodded as he surveyed the remains of the magic circle. "An impressive working," he said. "To manage such a spell would be a difficult feat, even for the entirety of the Ascended. You did well." The Eighth Circle all glowed with pride, having such compliments come from their master.

"Yes indeedly do, they did," said a voice from the shadows of the room. Charn'El turned as the speaker walked into the dim light of the chamber. The High Mage knew this bulbous, reptilian form well enough, and disguised his immediate and intense loathing for the creature. "You must be AWfully proud of them, Charney."

The Eighth Circle all bristled at the diminutive name for the High Mage, but with the tiniest of gestures Charn'El commanded them to be silent. "Pride has its place," he said, "and praise is given when due. My students sacrificed much to summon me. What have *you* to sacrifice for your Master, demon?"

"Why Charney, I thought you knew by now. I *have* no master, just like you. I come and go as I please and you can't kill me or make me do what you want and

isn't that soooo nice..." Barney skipped about the room, continuing to list the virtues of being him in a sing-song voice. Charn'El paid little attention to the creature's antics, instead focusing his will on regaining his connection to his world. After the long years in emptiness, it felt good to be able to stretch his mind forth and feel the power of his homeworld and everything on it.

Charn'El was so set on this that he only dimly registered Barney's capering coming to a sudden halt as the creature stared at the High Mage's hand.

"What is THAT!?" demanded the creature. Charn'El came out of his reverie and looked down at his hand. Clutched in his fingers was the hilt of a sword, a short length of the blade still attached.

Ah, Charn'El thought, I had almost forgotten. The High Mage smiled nastily, his mask obligingly shifting a little to let the smile show though. "A gift from the cubs of white death," he said. "You were bragging about doing as you please. Consider this your new leash."

Barney whimpered plaintively. "Give it to me. Friends share, after all, and aren't we friends? You really *should* give it to me."

Charn'El laughed. "Don't try your little games on a superior mind, creature. You are a tool, a monster to be unleashed on the humans, not an ally. Before I did not have the means to muzzle you perfectly. Now I do, and you will *obey!*" The Eighth Circle watched this conflict, silently moving themselves out of the immediate line of fire and into position to be of assistance to the High Mage.

Barney hunched over, his form shifting and twisting as his true nature surfaced. Paws became talons, crackling with dark energies. He growled, a low, dangerous sound. "No one talks to me like that, *mage*," he snarled. "No one!"

Charn'El smiled even more nastily and waved the broken sword in Barney's face. "Be silent, beast," he commanded, "or do I let this blade eat your soul?" Barney growled again, and concentrated. The walls of the chamber began to warp as the demon began asserting his reality, attempting to overlap the High Mage and his followers with something more tractable.

The High Mage was unimpressed. Barney had a habit of repeating his tactics, and this was no exception. Instead of cutting him with the broken Barney-Slayer, Charn'El instead channeled a small amount of the energy in Lyra's sun into a ball of light. A simple enough spell, but Charn'El only wanted to get his attention, not incinerate his opponent.

This was the moment Barney was waiting for. Breaking his hold over the general area, he focused his entire will on the ball of light, and through the spell, into Charn'El's mind. The Lyran was surprised enough to let the attack get through the first layers of his mental defenses. Barney grinned. "I've been learning since you've been gone," he said, focusing on battering down the mage's mental blocks. Once he'd conquered the High Mage, the rest of the planet would bend to his will without resistance, and then...

Charn'El strained to maintain his defenses, casting about for a way to break the

hold. Quickly he changed the light spell that linked the two, giving it the heat and power of Lyra's sun, then commanded that it shine directly on Barney, reducing his opponent to ashes. As the first light began to shine on the creature, and it began to howl, Charn'El smiled with satisfaction.

Then, a second too late, he realized something. Because of his haste to destroy the creature's corporeal form, the sympathetic link between Charn'El's light spell and Lyra's sun hadn't been dispelled correctly. When Charn'El had commanded the light spell to burn the creature, he had also commanded the sun to do the exact same thing. Realizing the extent of his mistake, the High Mage quickly started to weave protection spells, invoking his command over every living thing on the planet in the process. They wouldn't protect everything, but they would mitigate the damage to a great extent.

The light above Charn'El's citadel began to increase, slowly but surely burning everything in its path. As the temperature began to rise inside the chamber, the High Mage of Lyra could hear Barney's voice over his shoulder.

"Why don't we call it a draw?"

And the sky went white.

*"I've lost the bleeps, I've lost the sweeps, and I've lost the creeps!"*

*"The what, the what and the what?"*

—SPACEBALLS

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## 2: Where Did They Go, George?

VRDET BLANCA BASE  
SATURDAY, MAY 15, 1999  
4:00 AM LOCAL

It had been a quiet night on the graveyard spongin watch shift. The enemy was always active somewhere, but the ever-vigilant eyes of the Jihad kept watch and managed to stop most activity before it had begun. The technician on duty yawned and stretched, preparing for the shift changeover. Thinking mainly of getting some sleep, he called up the real-time global display of spongin activity for the next guy on shift.

What should have come up on the display was a list of all sponge-minions, Ly-rans and other assorted extradimensional villains currently on the planet and where they were. It also should have shown current global spongification levels - a side effect of the various world-conquest schemes used by the enemy in past years meant that almost everybody on Earth had *some* level of spongification.

What actually came up was a blank map.

NO HOSTILE FORCES DETECTED  
SPONGIFICATION LEVEL: 0%

The tech rubbed his eyes. This had to be a hallucination, or maybe a prank by one of the guys in R&D. He threw the monitoring system into a test phase, checking to see if there was some fault in the scanners. As the system ran through the test cycle, the door opened to let the morning shift crew in.

“Hey, Thompson,” said the first tech, “how are the eyes of the world doing?”

“Carl,” replied the second tech, “do you see what I’m seeing on the big board?”

Carl looked at the board, still displaying the blank map. He blinked. “System malfunction?” he asked.

“Could be. I’m running a check right now.” Just then the console chimed. Thompson punched the keys, putting the completed test report up on the board next to the map. The report showed a perfectly functional monitoring system, with no faults that would explain the map as a technical fault. The two techs looked at each other. “This is industrial-strength shit, man.” said Carl.

“No kidding. So what do we do now?”

“Well, when I was in orientation, they told me that whenever something weird happened that I should call the Doc.”

“Alright then, let’s call him. I hope to God he’s in a good mood...”

### MEANWHILE, IN CYBERSPACE

[tight beam, J16, tra. @5.15.2004.1100GMT]

xVRDET AI Core Minerva

oTRES Zeta, Cdr. Dan Wood

Dan?

—

xTRES Zeta, Cdr. Dan Wood

oVRDET AI Core Minerva

—

Alive and processing. What’s up, ‘Nervy?

—

For once I’ll let that slide. Can you check Ithaca’s scanning records for the past 24 hours?

—

In a nanose- ... ..

—

I take it you’re seeing what we’re seeing?

—

... Yep. I can wake His Lizardness and get you guys a live feed if you want

—

Please do.

—

On it. Oh, and Minerva?

—

Yes?

—

If this is what it looks like, where do we throw the party?

## BACK IN THE “REAL WORLD”

Several levels above the monitoring room, Professor Malaclypse was *just* getting to the good part of a particularly interesting dream when the intercom started demanding his attention at very high decibel levels. Growling, Mal levered himself out of bed and slammed his hand down on the intercom. “If this isn’t a high-priority emergency, I’m going to kill whoever’s on the other end of the line.”

“Doc, this is Thompson down in the monitoring room. Listen, we’ve got something odd showing up on our screens, can you take a look?”

“Allright, allright, pipe it over to my personal terminal. I swear, if this is another false alarm...”

“Okay, this is what we’re seeing.”

“Got it... hell-O.” Mal’s voice changed abruptly, the sleep draining out of his brain as he looked at the screen. “I’ll be right down. In the meantime, get on the horn with TRES and DE, see if they’re seeing the same thing we are.”

Three minutes later, Mal walked into the monitoring room, still adjusting his clothes as he went. “What’s the story?” he asked.

“DE reports seeing the same thing we do,” Thompson replied, never taking his eyes off the display. “TRES Ithaca isn’t sending us a live feed yet, but according to Commander Wood they’re getting similar readings on their scopes.”

Mal gazed at the display, nodding absently. “Okay, next step is to go over the shift logs. Look for anything, and I mean *anything* out of the ordinary. Next shift, that goes for you too. Let’s try and pin down exactly when this happened.”

“Sir?” one of the incoming technicians said, “Is this... it? Is it over?”

Mal glanced at the tech.

“Could be, kid. Could very well be.”

### 4:15 AM

“Hello, you have reached TRES Corps Zeta Squadron. All of our operators are currently busy fighting off ninjas, so please leave your name and number and we’ll get back to you as soon as we finish mopping up the ninja blood. Thank you. Beep.”

“Shad? Pick up the phone, goddamit. This is important.”

“This’d better be good, Mal.”

“And it’s nice to hear you, too. Turn on your spongescopes and tell me what you’re seeing.”

“Allright, allright... okay, scopes are on and.... That can’t be right. I’m not getting anything.”

“We’re not getting anything, either. Okay, thanks for the confirmation. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

“Hang on. What’s this about, Mal? Why aren’t my scopes seeing anything? And why aren’t *your* scopes seeing anything?”

“Off the record?”

“Well... alright.”

“Okay, we’re calling around to make sure we’re not being conned but... this is it, Shad. The war’s over.”

“... Wait. did you say the war’s *over*? As in, over over? Bad guys wiped out and everything?”

“I don’t know about wiped out, but far as we can figure out they’ve packed up and left. All of them. All the residual sponge energy, too.”

“Wow. That’s... who else knows?”

“Right now, you, me, the VR night shift and the DE duty officer know. Katze’s going to wake up somebody at the Prax, see if there’s an illusion spell blinding our monitors. Once we find that out, we’ll tell Command.”

“What do you need from us?”

“Turn your scopes outward, take a look at the space surrounding us. This might be a prelude to an attack from outside, and I don’t want to have a Lyran war fleet come in and spoil the victory party.”

“Gotcha, I’ll go wake up the techs now.”

### 5:45 AM

Sleepless nights weren’t all that common these days, but Katze still had enough of them to be problematic. Didn’t really matter why, all she knew is that she’d been up since 3 AM, and since she couldn’t sleep, she was taking the time to read a novel. Pleasure reading wasn’t something she got to do all that often anymore these days, and she was sort of enjoying the time.

So there she was at oh dark thirty, tie-dyed t-shirt and pajama bottoms, feet propped up on the desk, just about to hit the interesting part in *Time Out of Joint* when the intercom buzzed. Katze banged down the talk button and said, “Yeah?”

A voice that she didn’t recognize responded, “The Doc wants to see you in the monitoring room immediately.”

That was interesting. Katze knew that “The Doc” was how the techs affectionately referred to Mal, but why Mal would want to see her right this moment seemed somewhat baffling. “Be right down,” she responded, dog-eared the corner of her book, and put her slippers on.

A few minutes later, still carrying her book, she walked into the monitoring room, only to find Mal looking up at the big board. “You called for me?” she asked, and then took a second look at the scene in front of her. “It’s...there’s...is this real?”

“As far as we can tell. You mind getting Archchancellor Schneider on the phone and asking him to double-check it?”

“Sure, no problem. Anything specific?”

“Make sure they double-check for anything that might be causing us to see this.”

“Right. I’ll get right on it.”

**6:00 AM**

“Doc! Phone!”

“Speak now or forever hold your peace. Ah, Shad, good. Okay. Okay. Great, that’s good news. No, I’m going to tell the muckymucks once we get a final confirmation from the Prax. Yeah. What, at this hour? No, you’d better hold off until we make the all-hands announcement. Just in case. Okay. Well, save me a pint then. Yeah. Later.”

Mal hung up the phone. “Allright kids,” he said, “TRES Zeta confirms that there are no, that is N-O nasty surprises hanging around the solar system waiting for us to let our guard down. Once we hear from the JPV, we’ll know.”

**JPV HEADQUARTERS  
SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA, USA  
07:57 EST**

Deep in the headquarters of the Jihad Praxeum Veneficus (The Jihad’s Premier School of Wizardry™), a lone, tired mage was getting ready to welcome the morning shift in the watch room. She prepared to cast a sponge detection spell for the last time before she would be able to crash gratefully into her bed. Thanks to one of the many advances made by the JPV in the few years that it had been in action, a lone mage was able to amplify a detection spell to cover a much wider area.

She concentrated, running the spell through her mind as she had done hundreds of times before. At the culmination, she reached out to a plain looking sphere and placed her hands on either side. A few short moments passed before she jumped back in shock, the spell broken prematurely. She rushed to the comm screen and was reaching for a button completely obscured by a handwritten post-it:

“AC’s Personal Quarters. Do not press. Ever. I don’t care if an out-of-control fireball spell is melting through the basement. I don’t care if a low-level initiate is being chased around the student lounge by a Great Demon of Hell. I don’t even care if Creeping Horrors are slithering through the hallways looking for Japanese schoolgirls. Well... maybe then. Actually, no. Seriously, you really just do NOT want to press this button.”

When, mercifully for our as-yet unnamed mage-on-the-watch, at that moment a priority call interrupted her possibly suicidal (or at least really-seriously-scowl-worthy) action. The caller asked to immediately be transferred to the ArchChancellor wherever he may be.

Pausing for a moment, weighing her duty versus her sense of self-preservation, she saw the new shift decide to walk in at that exact moment. He was spun around by a mage-shaped blur through the door and regained his balance just in time to notice with dread the post-it fall off the now-lit Comm-button for the AC.

“Shit.”

Puppeteer opened his eyes and tried to will the alarm to stop. It was only recently that he finally was able to get a normal nights' sleep and let his subordinates handle day-to-day business. This was actually one of the first nights in quite a while where he had thought he'd be able to get a full night. If he didn't answer, maybe they'd catch the hint and leave him alone.

...

...

"AUGH!!! ALRIGHT FUCKING ALREADY!!! I'M COMING!!!"

The ArchChancellor slammed the button, displaying a fearful young mage who at this point would give back all the extra pay he received for watch service just to not be there at that moment.

"WHAT... DO YOU... WANT?"

"Uh... yeah. Uhm.. sir, you have a call from.. well... it's a video message, but.. ah... anyway, she said it was important and... I—"

"OUT WITH IT MAN!"

The mage's face went white.

"Wellsirit'skatzeandshesaidshereallyneedstotalktoyouandheresheis."

*\*CLICK\**

Puppeteer was surprised to see Katze's face on the screen. He noticed her expression and calmed down right quick.

"Pupp, we've got a major problem."

### AN HOUR OF FRANTIC SCRYING LATER...

"...so, I've had the guys in the Detection department double, triple and quadruple-check. According to them, and this agrees with my own conclusion, there are no more of the Purple One's forces anywhere on this planet, not to mention in the near vicinity."

Over the video-feed, Katze paused for a moment, thinking.

"Okay then. Video-conference with the rest of the JAO Heads in an hour. Be there or be square. And for god's sake, Pupp, get some clothes on."

Katze smirked and the video feed shut off. Puppeteer looked down at what he was wearing. For the first time, he realized he was still in his pajamas. It wouldn't be an issue except for the little moons and stars liberally sprinkled throughout. He thought a bit and decided it was probably a good thing she couldn't see his gorilla slippers.

### VRDET BASE BLANCA 9:00 AM LOCAL

"...and that's what we know. As far as we can tell, the entire enemy operation has picked up and left Earth. We won't have that confirmed hard for at least another

day or so until we can get a ground inspection of known operations, but the surveillance data so far is very convincing.”

The JAO leadership had congregated by videoconference, each one (save for the VR directors) listening to Mal make his report from their own offices. Mal stood in front of the now-blank situation map, still displaying a complete lack of sponging activity anywhere on Earth.

“Allright,” said Admiral Felton, “so the Hellwyrms is gone. Good riddance. But where did he *go*? He’s not dead, is he?”

Mal grimaced. “Frankly, we don’t know. All I can say is that, alive or dead, he’s not *here*. We’re still looking into it.”

That night, the Jihad to Destroy Barney partied like they’d never partied before. The Jihad was not unaccustomed to parties; one of the things that keeps an organization like that alive is the need to celebrate any victory, no matter how small. But tonight was different. They were celebrating the end of the war, and so the Jihad was determined to pull out all the stops.

As word spread out from the command meeting, supply officers started moving the booze and food into position. Other civic-minded Jihaddi started clearing space in their respective bases’ communal spaces, hanging decorations, getting the sound systems ready and all the other preparation that goes into making a really good party. By the time that the JAO heads had closed their video conference, contingents of off-duty Jihaddi had already gathered and were having a very good time without their commanders.

At TRES Corps’ main base, the parade ground was filled with drunken revelry. The Grand Admiral and his second had gotten into a drinking contest with a squad of noncoms, and before long a prodigious mountain of empty beer bottles had piled up around them. Six noncoms had already drunk themselves into a coma, but Admirals Felton and Davies were undaunted, still only pleasantly lit by all the beer. Around them, the rest of the Corps drank, danced and generally debauched by the light of a pair of giant bonfires.

At the underground McDonalds at the heart of Doberman Base Delta, the grease and sugar flowed like manna from Heaven as the Doberman soldiers sang bawdy songs and drained their cups in celebration. Off to one side, the monks of the Church of Grimace offered Big Macs as sacrifices to their patron, in thanks for delivering them from Evil.

In the halls of VRDET’s headquarters the Rangers celebrated in their own inimitable fashion. The Research staff had set up a small but serviceable dance floor and were putting on a rave, complete with pounding techno music and glowsticks. The Explorations staff had gotten a hold of a cache of St. Dino’s Finest and were alternating between smoking it and engaging in combat poetry. The command staff ended up retiring to the library for drinks and to listen to the dance music at a more tolerable level.

Dancing across the MAUL main compound with a beer in each hand, force commander Most Holy exhorted a gaggle of main battle tanks to dance the Time Warp. While the tank crews tore up the ground for the tap-dancing sequence of the song, MoHo's last rudimentary slivers of sobriety kept him from ordering a celebratory artillery barrage on the neighbors.

Fireworks lit up the sky over the Praxeum, as the wizards and witches of the magic college used their talents to put on a light show for the surrounding community. People from miles around would remember the strange blooms of color and shape for years to come. On the ground, the JPV's best illusion artists conjured up a reasonable facsimile of the Rolling Stones to entertain during the victory feast.

In their meeting hall, the worshippers of St. Dino sat around their communal hookah, inhaling great draughts of St. Dino's Finest while contemplating the end of the war. This wasn't terribly -unusual- behavior for the members of the Church, but it took on special significance tonight.

Jihaddi in safehouses and monitoring stations across the planet breathed sighs of relief and cracked open kegs of beer and bottles of wine.

In the London station, the command staff rolled out kegs of the finest lager while a group of visiting MAUL troopers played an impromptu concert of old Beatles covers.

In Vancouver, the TRES officers there used the discretionary fund to buy out an entire Chinese restaurant for a night.

In Cairo, the station's population toasted the Jihad's success with the finest coffees available in the marketplace.

In Tokyo, victory was celebrated with sake and karaoke.

The poor souls who had been assigned to Punta Arenas celebrated their freedom by teaching the nearby penguin colony how to play stud poker.

Out in the asteroid belt, the crew of the Jihad's black sheep warship, the SS Explain Star, celebrated by doing what they usually did; drinking themselves nearly into a coma. The ones who stayed slightly more sober decided to carve a bas-relief of the Jihad's triumph into a nearby rock.

The sun set and the sun rose, all around the world men and women looked up into the sky and prayed, or laughed, or simply radiated good cheer that the war they had fought was finally over, and they had *won*.

### BLANCA MOUNTAIN FIRING RANGE SATURDAY, MAY 22, 1999

Dee Greist casually stepped up to the firing line with a rifle bearing all the hallmarks of a design still in development; electrical tape forming the outer casing, and wires hanging around. She took aim and started squeezing the trigger... downrange the target started having holes appear in it, but the only sound near her was quiet clicks of new rounds being loaded.

"War's over, Dee," someone said from behind her. She glanced behind her at

Damocles and set down the rifle.

“I know, sir... I’m still hung over from the victory party.”

“That the subsonic gauss rifle thingie you wrote up the proposal for?”

“Yeah, I got a testbed built... it works pretty well. Hardly blows up anymore.”

There was an awkward silence for a bit before Damo spoke up.

“What’re you doing now?”

“I don’t know, really. I’ve been with all of you people since I was 9, for fuck’s sake. 6 years, a really good chunk of my life, and doing R&D stuff for most of it. I can’t likely get hired anywhere because of my age, and after this...” she shrugged and added, “Too many hobbies and not enough patience to go corporate too.”

“Wanna set up a shop together?” Dee blinked. “I did machine work once upon a time, and a small outfit would be able to just do whatever. Guns mainly, given things, but other projects would be fine too... and I’ve seen some of your work.” There was another awkward silence for a few seconds.

“I... I’d like that,” Dee finally stammered.

“Okay then. Oh, one thing though... about the Special Purpose Anti-Personnel Semi-Armor-Piercing Pointy Projectile Projector you designed?”

“Uh... yeah?”

“For the love of god, please don’t ever come up with anything with as bad of an acronym as SPAPSAPPPP again.”

*“Don’t you just hate it when you’re all dressed up and have no place to go?”*

—ANONYMOUS

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## **3: Unplanned Obsolescence**

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OFFICES OF THE TRIUMVIRATE  
UNDISCLOSED LOCATION  
TUESDAY, MAY 25, 1999

“Well, everyone’s waiting for us.”

Aris looked up at Mel, who was standing in the doorway to the conference room. “Yeah, just... hell. Do we even have a plan?”

“Mal saved us the trouble and gave us a few,” Katze said with heavy irony. “And unless you have any better ideas...”

Aris shrugged and looked around. It felt odd, being in this formal of a situation with the other triumvirs and their adjuncts. Normally, Trium meetings were low-key, held at one bar or another, usually called to discuss the outcomes of various operations and shoot down crazy ideas. It didn’t normally occur to her that Kirk Felton, her own adjunct, held a higher command rank than she did, albeit in another JAO; or that Katze, Shad’s adjunct, was her own direct commander. Trium meetings were special.

This one was doubly special.

“All right. Let’s go,” Shad said, standing up and following Melanie into the conference room.

Aris sighed and followed. The Triumvirate had seating at the head of the room

on a raised platform, the other JAO commands on small tiers around a large table with a central holographic display. At the moment, the display was a globe, blank.

“This meeting is called to order,” Shadur said, as the triumvir with the most seniority. “We have called this meeting to discuss what might be the most important event in the Jihad since its founding.”

This, followed by four hours of reports.

Aris had no idea how ‘the most important event in the Jihad’ could take four hours of reports and analysis.

“So...” Admiral Keith, over on the TRES side of the table, finally said, “To sum this all up, they’re gone?”

“Yes, they’re gone,” Aris replied, thankful someone had finally cut to the heart of the matter. “Every source available confirms it. We, I mean the Triumvirate, have even sent discreet inquiries into the Middle East, in case they broke with whatever tradition kept them out of there.”

Muttering from all sides. One or two people looked thankful it was out in the open, but most just looked nervous. Aris shook her head and plowed on. “So now, we need to decide what to do with ourselves. Mal, you have an outline of some options?”

Mal stood up from his seat at the back of VRDET’s small group and pushed his way forward to the table. “Right. We have three major options. We need to dismantle the Jihad and all its operations, and our biggest problem is the sheer amount of resources that we’ve consumed and locked down over the years.” He looked around the table.

“The first is to just leave everything in place and shift focus. There are other Causes out there which a broad-based paramilitary organization could commit to. We would have to change the name and file off a few serial numbers, but it would be straightforward.

“The second is to come clean, reveal ourselves to the mundane world, decommission, and allow ourselves to be absorbed into various governments in return for amnesty.”

That got a response. Nobody liked that one. Aris mentally sighed in relief.

“Possibly the simplest option is straight decommission. We lock up or blow up all our toys and go home, never to look back. Those who can go home, go. Those who have no homes get cover stories and resources to slip into mundane life. We dissolve the JAOs, destroy all our records, and leave no trace that the Jihad to Destroy Barney the Dinosaur ever existed.”

After nobody said anything for a moment, Shadur cleared his throat and asked, “Any comments?”

Aris leaned back as the arguments started, mostly between options one and three with a couple idealists holding out for option two. Mal stood at the table and answered questions. Aris was rubbing her eyes when a familiar voice from the TRES side of the room yelled, “What bullshit!”

Aris desperately wanted to keep her eyes closed. She forced them open as Mal asked, too calm for words, "Something to add, Jon?"

Jon Marburger, aka CyberPyro aka Deadlock the Feral, vanished from TRES Grand Admiralship in 1997 and returned two years later to one of the loudest cacophonies in the Corps. Former Praetor, former Triumvir Praetor.

Also not known for being the most levelheaded person around.

"Yeah, Mal," Deadlock said, standing. Tall and brightly burning blonde, he drew the eye and ended everyone else's conversations. Besides, this was drama better than you could get on cable. "I have something to add. You've given us three options: To follow you into a new damnfool crusade, to hand over our hard work to those idiots out there, or to stick our fucking heads in the sand. You haven't mentioned the option you're afraid of." He turned and swept his eyes over the rest of the commanders present. "We attack!"

Mal waited for the rumble of reaction to pass before he responded. "Attack? How do you propose we attack an enemy no longer on the field, Jon?"

"We find them!" Deadlock spread his hands entreatingly. "We chase them to wherever they're hiding and destroy them once and for all. Send ships out, probe magically, go to Death Valley and reopen the Babylon Road—"

"Reopen it?" Mal shook his head. "It's gone after nearly fifty years of threatening humanity's extinction just by sitting there, and you want to invite the Lyrans back?"

Deadlock turned to sneer. "Are you that frightened of them? Not all of us are. They've turned and run! We should chase them as far as we can."

"I'm not afraid of them, Jon. I'm just glad they're gone. And I remember what happened the last time you went off chasing Lyrans just because you could."

Aris squirmed slightly in her seat, wondering if she could dive off the platform before Deadlock turned the room into a fireball. From the expressions on the other Triums and the other JAO command staff, a lot of people were thinking the same thing.

Except for Admiral James Yearnshaw, sitting in the back of the TRES group, who was looking *very* interested in the proceedings.

"Are you accusing me of something, Mal?" Deadlock spit. "From the beginning I've wanted nothing but a victory, wanted it a damn sight more than most. Now, we have a chance to get it!" He turned to address the Triumvirate, saw he wouldn't get much help there, and turned back to the other JAOS. "Damn it, I know not all of you are cowards! We can do this, we can—"

Admiral Yearnshaw stood up from the back row. "No."

That set back everyone, especially Deadlock, who looked about ready to chew holes in deck plating. "What?"

"You heard me. I said no." The admiral moved forward, out into the space between Deadlock and the door. "You've got it backwards, Jon. I think you always did. Our victory isn't the destruction of the Lyrans, and it never was. The goal

was never destruction, or wholesale slaughter. There was a presence on this planet that threatened its existence and the survival of its inhabitants. These people, here, joined together and built what they did to expel that presence by any means necessary. Now it's gone. Maybe we had something to do with it and maybe we didn't, but they're all gone and that means we won. And not while I'm standing in front of you will any more soldiers die for your bloodlust."

Well. This was news. Aris looked around. Everyone who had been standing was now sitting down. Felton whispered something to Samhain, who was sitting beside the Triumvirs' platform, but it settled quickly. Deadlock was nodding, an angry nervous tic.

"It take you this long to grow enough backbone to stand up to me like that, Jim? That sounded a little like a threat." Deadlock blinked a couple times and grinned. "Just how do you think you're going to keep standing in my way if I decide you should move?"

Yearnshaw narrowed his eyes. "Why don't you go ahead and move me, then? Could be I've gotten heavier over the years."

"I'm not sure why you've forced me to do this, Jim," Deadlock said, and for a moment there was regret in his voice. "But don't think you're going to make me squeamish about it."

There was an explosion, and several screams. When the air cleared both Yearnshaw and Deadlock were out the door. Several scorch marks marred the table and the floor.

"Anyone burned?" Aris yelled above the sudden nervous babble. Mal was already out the door. Felton and Samhain were pushing through the crowd to follow him.

After a minute, the air cleared, and it became apparent that there were no serious injuries. Aris sat down again on the edge of the platform, next to Katze. "Twenty on Deadlock," she said.

Katze turned to her, frowning. "Why?"

"Because that way, even if he comes out ahead I'll have some good news."

"You're on." Katze stared out the door. "Do you know what's up with Admiral Yearnshaw?"

"No way. I don't think I'll ever know what happens in that guy's head."

### YEARNSHAW:

*He lets the plasma just hit him, I'd have done more damage throwing jello at the guy, I can almost see his head swell.*

*That's an impressive trick, Jim, you develop it on your own? Certainly no Jihad r&d department has miniaturized a plasma system that well."*

*That's right, Ernst, keep talking, and keep chasing me. I turn around and let him throw the plasma right back at me. Ow, shit, I hope that look on his face and whatever's going on behind it was worth forty percent of my shield capacity. I reach behind me inside my coat and pull out the guns. Caseless rounds don't even really sound like bullets, emptying*

*both magazines in around six seconds, it like somebody just ripped a whole newspaper in half in front of a bullhorn; hopefully it kept him off balance enough for at least half of each magazine to hit. Get up and start running again.*

*"First a match and now you're throwing rocks, Jim? So far you seem plenty easy to move, doing most of the moving yourself, even." He shuts his mouth long enough to throw a few fireballs; no more plasma. I don't even have to dodge this time, the idiot's actually playing with me. Good.*

*Throw one gun away, put the clip in the other, throw a few regular bullets just to keep him from suspecting about the others. Turn around and look at him, right at him, biggest grin I got. "Oh, I'm not moving anywhere I don't want to, and you're not even trying." Let the next shot look like it's singled me a little before I make it around the corner. Hit the lights, turn stealth on, and sprint the last fifty meters to the door. Check to make sure Stack set the trap right and wait. A few seconds later the doors blow off their hinges and he's out, he always did like to make an entrance. I turn on the sonics as soon as I see him and move without even waiting to see if they have an effect, draw him in.*

*Shit! I get careless for a second and he hits me, for a second I'm not sure if my left arm's there. Use it, fall down, make him think he's got me, by the time he's here the pain blockers will kick in. He reaches me, reaches for me, wants to finish it with his hands. Move at the last second, faster than he expects, pivot and ram the palm of my hand right up underneath his sternum, and at the same time I trigger the stunner in my palm I spring the only trap I've got. Blackness, sudden and complete, light amp won't work because there just isn't any light; took me two years after I came back before I even started to figure out light cancellation.*

*IR display shows the shock did exactly what it was supposed to with what I put in him earlier, spots showing up in the white. More fire now, but he's throwing blind. I move in and slap one of the charges on him. Blind and weakened or not his reflexes still catch me, I'm not sure which I feel first, the sensation of flying or the brand new crack he put in one of my ribs; this has to end soon. I trigger the charge and the tank of liquid helium he doesn't know is on his back explodes, at least the scream tells me he's starting to hurt too. Half the place is on fire around us now, getting hotter but no brighter, and even the air around him is white now. Doesn't want me getting close again, good, use all the energy you've got, Jon. The hotter it gets around him the more those spots on my display grow, I wonder if he knows what's going on, best hit him again before he figures it out. I pull out the batons and make them a lance, if the ceramic doesn't stand up against what he's still got going then this is over. Go straight at him, ignore the heat. He hears me coming and lunges but I'm out of the way in time and then it's sticking out of his side. Pour it on, the capacitors empty and I keep going, this has to be it. Receding heat tells me he's in trouble, but the sudden smell of cinnamon from nowhere tells me I am too; keep going, my knees start to buckle and I brace them, I stop feeling my back.*

*Blue flashes in my peripheral vision, trap's only got a few minutes left. Keep the juice flowing, finish this while I've got the muscle control left to do it. The knife's in my hand and I don't quite remember grabbing it, move in close, there's hardly any heat now, he's*

*got my left arm and I only hear it when my bones start breaking. Let him have it, don't need it any more. I'm behind him and three seconds feels like eternity, then the knife's in, right where it should be, I strip the handle and he finally goes down. The light field lasts longer than I do, the last of what I can generate goes into the lance and then even the IR goes black, never even felt myself hit the ground.*

*"Back off, I've got him." Stack. I don't know if I opened my eyes or if they just started working again, probably a bad idea to try and talk but it's been a good day for my bad ideas.*

*"Jul—"*

*"Quiet. It worked, we need to get out of here." I look up and Mal's looking back at me, I can see everything in his eyes. Son of a bitch.*

*"We knew it was going to happen, Jim, we knew somebody had to do it."*

*"Yeah. We knew, and they knew, and god damn the lot of you for making it me who had to do it." I look up and nod, she picks me up and hauls me away. I wonder how much of it worked.*

Mal silently watched Yearnshaw and his assistant limp off into the woods. The senior Illuminatus mentally cursed himself for a fool; if he'd been a bit quicker on the draw, Yearnshaw wouldn't have gotten himself nearly killed in this fight and Marburger would've earned his humiliation in front of the entire Jihad instead of out here, away from the important witnesses.

Ah well, Mal thought, water under the bridge. What's done is done. Time to deal with the aftermath. Mal glanced sharply at the undergrowth. From out of nowhere, a small cluster of men in ninja outfits, matte black save for a golden Eye on the right breast, appeared and bowed to Mal. "You summoned us?" asked the lead ninja.

Mal gestured at the broken form of Deadlock sprawled on the ground. "Get rid of that mess," he ordered. "Drop him in an emergency room somewhere and keep Agharti informed. Special measures, but nothing lethal - that's direct from the Five, so take it seriously."

"Sir." The ninjas bowed again, then vanished, taking Marburger with them. As far as anybody could tell, there was no trace left that suggested that a fight had taken place there. Mal waited for the rest of the Jihad leadership to arrive and wasn't disappointed when half a minute later Samhain and Admiral Felton crashed through the brush behind him.

"Did ye find them?" Felton demanded. Mal shook his head.

"No sign of them around here. Probably took the fight deeper into the woods." Felton nodded distractedly, looking into the forest for possible chase routes. Samhain looked speculatively at Mal. "You know," he said, "I'm not sure that I believe you."

Mal looked at Samhain, then sighed tiredly. "Sam," he said, "I don't really care what you believe."

## MEANWHILE...

"Folks, folks," Aris said, tapping the gavel. "Can we quiet down, please?"

Admiral Svartalf over in the TRES section sent her a glare. "I don't know if you noticed what just happened, but I'm not sure we should 'settle down.'"

"Deadlock and Yearnshaw will have to settle things their own way," Mel said, leaning forward slightly. "The timing was spectacularly bad, but until they calm down and get back in here, there's not much we can do."

"Except try and figure out what we're all going to do next," Shad said. "Which was the point of this exercise in the first place."

Grumbles from the other Jihaddi, mostly from the TRES staff.

"We need to figure out what to do," Aris said slowly, "Before we start tearing each other's throats out. Like what just happened."

More muttering, a slightly better tone.

Pupp cleared his throat from where he sat, slightly back from Mel. "Well, instead of three options we have four. Redirect, surrender, disappear, or attack."

"Well, I hope we can throw out the attack option," Admiral Keith said. "We're not exactly equipped for a direct assault on the Lyran homeworld."

"Agreed," Windigo said quietly. "That is not the battle the Jihad should be taking."

"So we're back to debating the other options," Keith said. He looked around at the other JAOs. "I guess we've already eliminated giving ourselves up to the rest of the world."

"We sure have," someone from JPV said. Lorin. Aris rubbed her eyes and promised herself a review of command staff IDs once the meeting was through.

"I'm not so sure I like the sound of disbanding," someone from DE said. "We spent years putting this force together. Years and resources. It would be wasteful to throw it all away now."

"But we've done everything we set out to do." Keith again.

"We don't know that," the DE man said, standing. Centurion Cerberus, Aris recognized belatedly. "They could be waiting for us to drop our guard."

There was a swell of muttering at that. Nodding heads.

"If we dissolve ourselves, there will be no force here when they come back. There will be nobody to stand in their way."

"That's assuming they mean to return," Shad said from Aris' left. "Look at the spongification index. Zero. And the Babylon Road is closed. If they mean to return, they mean to do it with no support."

"Or maybe the Lyrans mean to stage a full-scale assault."

"In that case, we should go to the authorities," Mel said, "Since we don't have the resources if all of Lyra decides to launch at us."

Everyone at the room twitched at that thought.

“But if they aren’t,” Shad said, “If they’ve merely lost interest in us, if we’re too hard a nut to crack and they’ve backed off, then we have finished our purpose. We should realize that.”

“The Lyrans have never been willing to strike at Earth directly,” Keith added. “And without resources on the ground here, I doubt they’ll start now.”

“And what if they’re massing just out of sight of our solar system?” Cerberus argued. “Or in another dimension? What if they’re going to strike at us through Marraketh?”

Katze bristled. “NO,” she snapped. “Marraketh is no longer one of the Wyrms’ options. And it will never. Be. Again.”

Cerberus was taken aback for a moment. “Okay. Bad example.” He groped for his thread again. “But there are other avenues. And it’s not like there’s nothing to do for our own world while we wait.” He pointed at the globe. “We have resources, and training. There are plenty of other projects we could do while we wait.”

“Other projects?” That was Admiral Svartalf. “You mean mercenary missions, like Praetor Serp would have had us do?”

“Now WAIT JUST A MINUTE—”

That tore it. Aris buried her head in her hands as shouting broke out across the council room. Shad started banging the gavel.

“Did we miss anything?” Mal said from the door.

“Nothing much,” Shad said, as Felton and Samhain filed back to their seats and the shouting died down. “Just some bad invocations. What happened?”

“Both of them ran off. We couldn’t figure out who won.” Mal looked around, eyebrow raised. “Have we reached a consensus?”

“Hardly,” Aris grumbled.

“No outside assignments,” Lorin from JPV said. “This whole Jihad was personal. Why should we get involved in other affairs of this world?”

“Well,” Mal said, apparently playing devil’s advocate, “We do have an awful lot of guns. Surely there’s something we could blow up to make the world a better place?”

“Mmm,” Aris said, “Your violent altruism aside, we’d still have to decide what cause to throw our backing behind. Any ideas?”

It took, all told, less than an hour to find major problems with every suggestion that came up. Finally, Mel reached over and grabbed Shad’s gavel, slamming it into the table. “Great. No deal on that plan. Who’s for total decommissioning?”

There was a long silence. Finally, Admiral Keith said, “You’re talking about killing the Jihad.”

“I’m talking about *ending* the Jihad,” Mel corrected, “and going the hell *home*.”

There was an agonizing stretch of silence. Finally, Keith nodded, and raised his hand. One by one, other hands followed, until a clear majority was reached. Centurion Cerberus sat with his arms stubbornly crossed, glaring.

“All right.” Aris stood up and nodded to the other Triumvirs. “We’ll expect draft

plans for total decommissioning of your JAOs by the end of the week.”

As the others left, Katze leaned over to mutter in Aris’ ear. “We just voted ourselves out of existence?”

“I guess so.” Aris suddenly grinned. “This means I *never* have to take your job.”

*“When the music’s over / Turn out the lights.”*

—JIM MORRISON

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## 4: I’m Sailing Away...

EARTH ORBIT  
23,000 MILES ABOVE ECUADOR  
SUNDAY, JULY 4, 1999

Of all the things in the Jihad to Destroy Barney’s toybox, TRES Corps Space Station Ithaca was by far the largest. A flying saucer the size of a supertanker, Ithaca Station had the distinction of not being built by the Jihad, but rather *discovered* in orbit after the unusual events of Operation Worldwalk, apparently thrown there by a random riptide in the fabric of reality.

Never ones to look a gift horse in the mouth, TRES Corps claimed the station and promptly began using it as a place to keep their stable of mad scientists. It was a reasonable decision; after all, the place was far enough out of the way in geosynchronous orbit that nobody would notice unless the lunatics of Zeta Squad started setting off nukes. For the previous four years, TRES Zeta had enjoyed their unique window on the world.

Today, that window would be closed.

The commanders and officers of Zeta Squad floated at attention inside the cargo bay of the orbital transport that would take them back to Earth. Alongside their transport, another three shuttles stood by containing all of the salvaged equipment from the station. What couldn’t be stripped out of Ithaca, and the small but ser-

viceable fleet of orbital interceptor craft that Ithaca (apparently) was designed to maintain, remained onboard for the final decommissioning.

Admiral Svartalf kicked away from the cargo bay's forward access hatch and drifted to a stop in front of his troops. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said solemnly, "today we mark the beginnings of the decommissioning of TRES Corps. As decreed by the Grand Admiral, Zeta Squad has officially shut down operations at Ithaca Station, and is now prepared to return to home base for final processing. Since we can't just leave the station here, and we can't blow it up without anybody noticing-" a brief chuckle from the squaddies rolled through the bay "-we will instead send Ithaca into an orbit which will result in it colliding with the Sun in six months."

So saying, Svartalf pulled a small black box with a single red button out of his pants pocket and, with a minimum of flourish, pushed the button. Outside, invisible to the Zeta crew, Ithaca Station's array of ion engine lit up and began to push the massive station out of orbit. The station shuddered slightly, then slowly inched away from the small flotilla of TRES shuttles.

Svartalf pocketed the device. "Ithaca was our home," he said quietly, "and it deserves a Viking funeral. So goodbye, Space Station Ithaca, and thank you."

Down in his "quarters" deep inside the logic core of the TRES shuttle, Commander Dan Wood listened to Svartalf's little speech and smiled, lifting a virtual martini to his virtual lips.

Svartalf hadn't been entirely correct when he said that Ithaca had been sent into the Sun. Dan had fiddled with the fight controls just before he'd transferred himself over for evacuation. The station would fly *towards* the Sun, true, but it would end up in a nice, stable solar orbit just inside the orbit of Venus. Being an artificial construct himself, Dan hated to see perfectly good hardware junked.

And, he mused as the shuttle began the long descent to Earth, he might end up needing a vacation home one of these days.

### SOUTH SIDE OF PITTSBURGH THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 1999

"So, uh... do YOU have any idea where we're going?"

"Well, the directions say we should walk.. another block and the place should be on the left. It says: Dee's Cafe."

The street was bustling at 1:00am, surprising the four as they were briskly moving down the sidewalk. An astute observer would be able to notice the party's tendency to stay closer to the buildings rather than the curb.

Mixing in quite easily with the usual strange denizens of the South Side, they exchanged light conversation while still keeping alert to any threats in the new environment. The figure draped in black treaded so softly that it was like he wasn't even there. The statuesque woman in the jeans and Cal t-shirt strode with light,

cautious steps, as if she was trying to avoid damaging the ground itself. Following not-too-distantly behind them was a trench-coated man, eyes covered by the shadow of a wide-brimmed hat. He walked with the assured confidence of those who know exactly where they're going even when they technically don't have a clue. To his right, an attractive woman in a not-so-attractive tie-dyed shirt stepped lightly, taking in her surroundings. Her blue eyes twinkled mischievously.

Pausing at the entrance to Dee's, Malaclypse removed his hat and chuckled as he dodged a scrawny college student sporting a pompadour and leather being launched through the doorway. Mal recognized the tune blaring from the vintage Wurlitzer as Johnny Cash, but not which song.

"Did he tell *you* anything," Malaclypse asked Katze as she tried to avoid the better part of a bar-goer's drink being poured on her shoes.

Frowning, unsuccessful in her dodge, Katze sighed. "Nothing. He's been pretty distant lately, to be honest."

"And Aris?"

"She said she'd be here. I guess she'll be meeting us."

"Okay." Malaclypse scanned the bar. Considering the outside of the joint looked very run-down and divey, he was surprised to see that the crowd was pretty young and trendy. Well, trendy for the late '50's. The predominant fashion trend seemed to be somewhere between Grease and The Stray Cats.

Meanwhile, the two remaining members of the party, Rens Houben and Melanie Davies, sidled up to the bar to commence the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

"What do you mean you don't have Guinness!?" Davies shook her head in disgust. Rens ordered a mixed drink while his companion gave the bartender the third degree regarding the distinct lack of good British ale.

Malaclypse and Katze started looking for the initiator of the meeting. Pupp wasn't in any of the tables or booths visible on the first floor, but there was a non-descript staircase in the back with a faded sign which said:

"Second floor OPEN."

Heading towards the stairs, Malaclypse motioned to the others to follow.

Trailing Malaclypse to the stairs, Katze contemplated her experience working with Pupp. As his friend and confidant on all things JPV-related, she usually was up to date on everything he was involved in.

Considering the fact that Pupp wasn't really the most subtle guy in the world, the amount of secrecy surrounding the meeting gave her a sick feeling deep in her stomach. That, and the small addition he made to her invitation to the meeting didn't make her feel all that better, despite his weak attempt at re-assurance:

TO R. HOUBEN, MALACLYPSE, K. BRENNER, A. MERQUONI AND M. DAVIES:

PLEASE MEET ME AT THIS LOCATION ON SEPT. 31 AT 01:00GMT  
DEE'S CAFE, E. CARSON ST, PITTSBURGH PA, USA  
CAN'T GIVE ANY INFORMATION NOW. VERY URGENT. WILL FILL YOU  
ALL IN.

The only bit added to Katze's was:

KAT: DON'T PANIC.

Ignoring his blaring *Hitchbiker's Guide* reference, Katze couldn't help but do exactly that. Secrecy was just not in Pupp's character. She couldn't imagine what would bring this about.

Suddenly, she was wrenched from her thoughts as she noticed Mal's voice breaking into her consciousness. Standing at the foot of the steps, he looked concerned.

"You okay? You seem a bit preoccupied."

Katze paused for a moment and gathered her thoughts. She took a deep breath and shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Let's head up and see what's so bloody important that he couldn't tell me beforehand."

When the pair reached the top of the stairs, their eyes were immediately drawn to the large crowd across the room. The rest of the party stood speechless, as they all noticed the upper half of a pointy hat above the crowd.

Said crowd was currently applauding wildly and cheering on the Jihad's chief wizard, who was about halfway through chugging a bottle of some cheap hard liquor.

"CHUG!! CHUG!! CHUG!! CHUG!!! YAAAAA AAAA!!! WOO-HOO!!!"

"Gah! Hoka— *\*burp\** Hokee. Foor my NECSHT trickle... sprick... TRICK!"

Puppeteer staggered sideways a few steps and started to fall backwards before a bar-goer gave him a boost. He blinked and noticed the Jihaddi.

"Heeeeeeyy whazzzup guys? I—" *\*WHUMP\**

As the crowd realized that the show was over, they quickly made their way to other more interesting activities. They stepped over the still form laying face-down on the floor, heading for the bar, pool tables or ping pong.

Houben looked around at the others, "So. Uhm. I guess we should pick him up then?"

Katze shook her head and picked up Pupp's hat. She studied it for a bit and then joined in lifting the passed-out wizard from the floor and dropping him into a booth. "Jeez. He smells like a distillery."

"Pupp! Hey! Wake up! Eris. He's totally smashed." Malaclypse gave Puppeteer one last shake and sighed, letting the mage's head fall forward on the table.

“Well, we’re here. We might as well get a drink while we wait. Is that a ping-pong table?” He smirked evilly. “Anyone feel like a bet?”

### ONE HOUR LATER...

The table was really cold... and sticky. Puppeteer lifted his head up and tried not to fall over when everything went red.

“Ohhh mmaaaaaaan. This is.. so NOT cool.” He steadied himself and suddenly realized Malaclypse was sitting patiently across from him, giving one of those unique looks he was so good at. Pupp didn’t even try to match Mal’s gaze.

“So.” He tried to shake away the clouds. “I... guess you want to know why we’re here?” He blinked and shook his head again. “Waitasec. Lemme do some.. something first.” He closed his eyes and concentrated. A faint glow appeared to line his body.

“Okay. Much better now. Just had to get rid of some of that alcohol.” He looked around for the other Jihaddi. Katze was scanning through the selections in the jukebox, Mel Davies was in the middle of a game of cricket with Houben, who was finding out why you don’t play a Brit in darts. Aris Merquoni had apparently shown up while Pupp was passed out, and was busy showing some frat guys how to properly down shots.

“Let’s get everybody over here. I want to get this over with so we can get back to the drinking.”

After Mal and Pupp finally managed to gather the others around the booth, Pupp took a deep breath and gave everyone the news:

“I’m going to come right out with it. I’m shutting down JPV and leaving.” He paused briefly for dramatic effect, and continued before anyone had a chance to interject.

“Y’all know how hard it is to live two lives. For us wizard-types, it’s doubly hard. We have to hide the very quality that DEFINES us.” He looked around the table and dropped his head, studying the stained rings in the wood.

“I... just can’t hide it anymore.”

“So, Halloween night at midnight, I’ll be moving the whole JPV campus and any who wish to come along to... somewhere else. Somewhere more hospitable. Somewhere where the JPV and I don’t have to hide anymore. All that I’ll say is that it won’t be on this dimension and I don’t know if I’ll be able to be reached. This is something I’ve thought long and hard about, and I’m definitely going to do it.” He looked at everyone in the eye, searching for someone to protest.

Everyone looked at each other for what painfully seemed like hours before Mal finally spoke up. He waved at the bartender casually and pulled out a quite-more-normal-than-you’d-expect billfold.

“Well. I don’t think anyone here is going to argue. So, I don’t really see much left but to continue the drinking.”

The others nodded, and Katze pulled Puppeteer into a bear-hug.

Aris couldn't resist. "Awwwww isn't that CYOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOT. Group hug!"

Mal wanted no part of such activities, as the rest surged to their feet to join in. Pupp struggled to get away from the forced ky00t-ness, but never had a chance. And there was much rejoicing.

**JPV HEADQUARTERS**  
**SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA**  
**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1999**  
**11:00 PM**

Katze looked around the small room that had been assigned as her sleeping quarters at JPV headquarters. The room was nearly as bare as it had been when she moved into it. There was a backpack on the floor, with the last few things she was carrying out, and there was a photo on the desk.

She picked up the photo and stared at it. It was a snapshot of a group of people, most of 'em looking like they were about to keel over and fall asleep, standing in front of what appeared to be a perfectly normal U-Haul van. That was the event that had made JPV, bringing the Slayer home to the campus, and their 'honor guard' turned out to have its hands quite full in bringing it home.

But they had survived, and possibly even thrived in that time. And then had come the one event none of them had expected, and then Pupp had come up with the crazy idea to take JPV somewhere else. She'd thought about going, but finally she decided she didn't want to start over again. Besides, while Pupp had said that he was tired of hiding who he was — Katze understood the truth of that statement; some secrets ran deeper than others — she had less invested in the part of her identity that was 'mage' as some of the others.

She put the photograph in her bag and looked around the room one last time. Bare and empty, a moment of her life coming to an end. Not wanting to think about it anymore, she grabbed her bag and fled the room.

After a bit of wandering, she found herself saluting the guard to the vault in which the Slayer was kept, and entering. She wasn't sure why this is where she ended up, just that it was. She sat in the vault, away from the bright lighting that lit the shards of the Slayer — it had broken long ago, in the battle where Owsen died, and its brokenness had been kept a secret from most of the Jihad since then — and mused quietly to herself.

She didn't know how long she'd been down there, just drifting with her thoughts, when another person came in the room. "I thought I'd find you here, Kats," the person said, and she recognized Pupp's voice. "It's getting to be time we got started, which means you need to go."

Katze nodded, although Pupp probably couldn't see it in the darkness. "Just paying my last respects to the Jihad as it was," she said quietly. "And trying not to think that this means goodbye."

Pupp nodded, but didn't say anything. He turned and walked out of the vault, and she rose and followed him. The two walked back upstairs without a word, although there wasn't much left to say. Finally, Katze decided it would be a good idea to ask. "Where are you going, anyway?"

Pupp smiled his usual manic grin. "I forgot to mention, didn't I?"

"Yeah. And since you're wandering off with the Slayer, it might be a good idea for somebody left behind to know where the hell you are."

He laughed, and suddenly shifted course. "Right! Follow me, I'll show you."

Katze followed Pupp, not sure what he was thinking, until they walked into his usual disaster of an office. Katze stood in the doorway, watching Pupp cause minor avalanches in the stacks of paperwork everywhere as he hunted for something or other. Finally, he came up with a battered paperback novel and threw it at her. "Catch!"

Katze stared at the novel, as it wasn't one she recognized. "*The Colour of Magic?* Magic has colour?"

Pupp laughed. "Keep it. Read it when you get a chance. And that's where we're at."

Katze shook her head. Pupp could be quite random when he so chose to be, and this looked like one of his more random moments. She put the book in her backpack, next to the picture. The two of them looked at one another, and finally, Katze said, "I think I'm going to miss you, Pupp."

Pupp smiled, but it was a more subdued manic grin. "I still wish you were coming. We could have a lot of fun."

## 11:56 PM

Puppeteer looked out across a sea of pointy hats in multiple colors and designs. The stage was set up on the parade grounds of the JPV campus. The parade grounds had rarely been used in the campus' short history, as the term "parade grounds" would suggest someone actually parading, which is not really your average wizard's favorite activity. He looked to his left and right, flanked on both sides by JPV's 2nd Torus'. The group of mages who had achieved 2nd Torus were not only some of the best mages in the Jihad (or even the world), but they were Pupp's closest advisors and in some cases his best friends. Only a couple of them even knew why they were there.

Also in attendance were the Triumvirate and other well-known Jihaddi. Those who weren't in their dress uniforms were garbed in various anime character outfits and other costumes. It was Halloween, after all.

Puppeteer looked at his watch one last time and decided it was time to get things rolling. He stepped up to the podium and patiently waited for everyone's attention. He took a deep breath.

"Hey everybody. First of all happy All Hallow's Eve. I guess you all want to know why we're here. The meaning of life aside, As we are all too aware, the Praxeum's

reason to exist is now gone. For whatever reason, the Purple Bastard and all his minions have left this plane, and that as Bono would say, is fucking brilliant.”

He waited for the cheering and applause to die off. Some already half drunk mage conjured a brief fireworks display, and if time wasn't so short, Pupp would have let it continue. However, he had to give said mage “The Look” until the display ceased.

“Now, to get down to business.” He checked his watch again. “In exactly three-and-a-half minutes, the Jihad Praxeum Veneficus will be closed for business. Also, I will be going on an indefinite vacation and this entire campus is coming with me. Some of you will be coming with me, and those of you who aren't will not be able to find us.”

He noticed the look on the TRES Grand Admiral's face as he heard this. The brief glow behind Darkside's eyes betrayed his feelings regarding Puppeteer's announcement, even as he regained his composure and usually solid demeanor. Darkside immediately leaned over to Malaclypse, sitting in the next seat. The exchange was animated, but what Mal told Darkside must have satisfied him, as he stayed in his seat and Pupp, against all odds, wasn't dead.

Pupp continued, “It has been the greatest honor of my life to teach, learn, live, and serve with you all. It's been real. Those of you who are coming, please join me up on the stage.”

Here and there, a mage or two stood from their seat and strolled up to join the ArchChancellor on the stage. When Puppeteer was satisfied that everyone was present, the 13 mages gathered in a small circle and joined hands.

The ArchChancellor closed his eyes and began speaking softly. The other 12 chimed in, while some just kept their eyes closed and concentrated. Gradually, a blue glow began to outline the thirteen spellcasters. As their voices continued to get louder, the glow expanded outward and started outlining the buildings on the campus. The rest of the JPVers out in the audience began to feel uncomfortable as the air became thick with magic.

Katze became aware of a throbbing pressure on her temples. She tried to shake it off, but could only hold her head, praying for it to stop.

Darkside looked around. Some of the mages in the audience looked like they had bad headaches, rubbing their temples with exclamations of mild pain on their faces. He noticed the taste of ozone in the air.

Aris Merquoni and Rens Houben both struggled to stay in human form. SO much magic, Aris thought as she fought to keep her form. Rens meditated, trying to keep from being distracted.

Just as it became intolerable, it was over.

One by one, the attendees opened their eyes to find an open field. The only structure left present was the stage. The JPV mages met in small groups and made their goodbyes, doffing their robes and hats, piling them into a mound in front of

the stage. When everyone completed the task, a lone mage cast a surprisingly anti-climactic fireball, incinerating the clothing. Here and there, a small spell went off, left behind by absent-minded mages.

**MAUL HEADQUARTERS  
SOMEWHERE IN THE AMERICAN HEARTLAND  
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 1999**

It came as very little surprise that it was raining. Somehow, the collective minds of the MAUL contingent knew that it was fitting that they were standing outside their base in full dress uniforms, in the rain, waiting for their home for the last six years to be destroyed. A JPV mage who had friends in the group had obliged with a shield spell to keep them all dry, but it was the principle of the thing, dammit.

The MAULies stood impassively in ranks, facing the entrance to the base. A makeshift podium had been set up under the entrance gate, and behind it stood MAUL El Supremo Most Holy himself. He, unlike the troops, was -not- under the rain shield, so it was an increasingly damp Supreme Commander who addressed them.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m going to make this a brief as possible in order to get out of these wet clothes. For the last six years, we defended the Midwest from the Hellwurm. We kicked ass and took names, and we had a lot of fun doing it. Now, we’ve won. Congratulations. You all deserve a pay raise, but now we don’t have any more money, so you’ll have to settle for getting the rest of your lives back. And now, without further ado...”

MoHo turned away from the troops and towards the base. Pulling a black box with a single red button of his uniform coat, he yelled “Bippity boppity boo!” and pushed the button.

Detonation charges fired inside the base, swiftly rendering the buildings into piles of unrecognizable debris. As a final touch, the arched entrance to the MAUL base toppled over behind MoHo with a tremendous crash, splashing mud everywhere.

MoHo turned back to the troops, grinning. “That was fun,” he said. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m outta here. Dismissed!”

**DOBERMAN EMPIRE BASE DELTA  
SOUTHWESTERN ARKANSAS  
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 1999**

It was a cool, sunny day on a mountain hillside in Arkansas where twenty thousand fighting men and women gathered to be told they would not have to fight any longer. Row upon row of black uniforms filled the landscape. With them were the Brothers of Grimace in their cowled robes, and a hundred men from FERRET, the Artic and mountain patrol specialists, their white camouflage outfits standing out from the crowd. Even the dogs, released from their kennels, sat or stood with their full attention on the podium.

The assembled ranks were smaller than one would have seen had the ceremony been held four years earlier. The large portion of crippled attendees told the story. WALRUS had been more than decimated in the assault on Pacifica, depleted to the point where it was no longer an effective fighting force. The mainline forces had taken a heavy toll as well, though they were not the first ones on the beach. On top of those losses were the thousands killed in the X'hirjq invasion. Those wounded in body never lost their spirit, many continuing in non-combat roles, and were today honored as were those who could not be here.

In contrast to the assembled ranks, Doberman Empire Fleet Commander Aurelius Invid Manticore Samhain was not in uniform, instead wearing his standard black trenchcoat and fatigues. He hardly ever wore a uniform as it was, but this choice of clothing on this day symbolized all Jihaddis' imminent return to civilian life. He stepped to the podium and the crowd hushed to hear his words.

"For ten long years, with the guidance of Lord Grimace, the glorious Doberman Empire and our great allies in the Jihad have fought the Hell Wyrms B'harnei. Tonight, we stand victorious. The war is over."

The audience broke into scattered applause and cheers, while some simply wept. Samhain kept the speech short while still giving his men the recognition they deserved. From time to time, he handed the podium off to the heads of Doberman divisions, Commanders and Centurions who spoke words on behalf of WEDJEE, WALRUS, and the other sub-orgs they led. "And now, some words from Commander Osiris Artemis Cyrene Inagei."

Windigo took the stage, her white fur waving in the gentle autumn breeze. She was the grandmother of the Maenads in the Jihad, the one who brought the Feral power to bear against the Hell Wyrms and who inducted the Jihad's fiercest warriors into the den of the Holy Albino. Many Jihaddi did not understand the Maenads and feared them at first, but here there were no feelings other than respect, devotion, and honor.

"Done well, you have. Fight like Maenads, you do. The Maenads, for thousands of years, defend the Earth, we have. The Maenads, in the future, defend the Earth, we will. A time of peace, this now is. Enjoy it."

Samhain retook the podium and concluded the ceremonies. "By agreement of the High Council, the Doberman Empire is disbanded. There will be a final celebration before Base Delta is decommissioned over the next month. WEDJEE, our naval yards, and other facilities will be decommissioned or turned over to civilian use. For now, let's fire up the big grill and use the last of our food stores."

**TRES CORPS HEADQUARTERS, COLORADO  
OFFICE OF THE GRAND ADMIRAL  
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1999**

His pen hesitated over the signature line of the thick ream of documents set on the desk blotter in front of him. Although he hated paperwork in general, and

usually relished that final scrawl of his hand which completed a pile of it, this one... this one pained him to finish. It was, after all, probably the last set of orders he'd ever have to give in his life. When you've been a professional soldier for the better part of three centuries, it's a hard concept to grasp.

It just felt *wrong*, he mused, closing up shop like this. He'd been at it so long, all of them had, and the end just seemed so... sudden and empty, because when you've been fighting the Ultimate Evil of the universe your expectations of a big, loud and above all flashy finish get raised. You don't expect the enemy to just pack it all in and vanish from the face of the earth. The TRES Corps Grand Admiral carefully set the pen down on the desk blotter and turned his executive chair to look out his broad windows.

A number of the non-critical facilities had already been demolished, and large earth movers were already at work, churning the rocky soil to cover over what remained of their foundations. Where once was a lush, verdant parade field, now covered with fresh powder, soon would only be an expanse of mud and debris. In probably less than a month, there would be little sign that there was ever a paramilitary compound here. Even now, here in the command building, preparations were being made to seal the underground levels off from the glass and steel facade. In twenty-four hours, the surface structure would be demolished, and the mountain-side brought down upon the remains.

The polite cough of someone loudly trying not to disturb him pulled his attention away from the window. "Oh. Hey Mel," Felton said, noticing his second-in-command standing in his doorway.

"You probably shouldn't be in here, sir," Davies said, smiling slightly as she stepped into the office proper. "There's a squad of recruits out here that have been waiting to come in to clear the rest of the stuff out of your office but have been too afraid to bother you."

"I know. I just wanted to finish some last-minute details in the old office. And you can dispense with the 'sir', Mel. We're practically civilians now, anyway." With a heavy sigh, he picked up the pen, and signed the document. "And now, at least officially, we are."

And it was official. The TRES Corps was no more. The stack of papers sitting on the desk before him detailed the final closing operations and put into writing the machinations that were already well under way. Any equipment that could be stripped and sold on the Mundane market was being carted away in a fleet of rental trucks, and the remainder—a wealth of over-tech weaponry and armored vehicles not suitable for the mundane world in general—was to remain here, sealed beneath the mountain.

"It's time, then," said Davies. Felton nodded, picking up the sheaf of papers and tapping them into line before setting them neatly into a folder.

The two flag officers stepped out into now naked space that served as a reception area for the Grand Admiral's office. The squad of recruits moved with haste into

the office as soon as it was cleared and began to lug out the last of the furniture as Felton and Davies took the short elevator ride to the top level.

“The demolition team would like us to get this over with as quickly as possible,” Davies said, conversationally. “They’re a bit nervous having people in the building now that it’s all wired.”

Felton nodded mutely. His mind was preoccupied with the days to come. After supervising the final cleanup of the grounds, he was to catch a flight to San Francisco to oversee the liquidation of a number of the JAO’s shell companies; most of them— minor technology firms— would be sold off to some venture Malaclypse the Seeker was undertaking.

The largest, and probably the most public, Pegasus Communications, was to remain independent and under his supervision. For many years the telecommunications firm was a front for the part of the Jihad-wide communications network that the TRES Corps maintained, but the increasing prevalence of wireless communications had seen it gain a small but not insignificant share in the public market. Now it would be a stepping stone for those in the Corps not yet ready to make that leap back into the pool of mundane life on their own, himself included.

But then what? Being a corporate CEO just didn’t seem appropriate for an old warhorse like him. But what the hell... maybe he was due a bit of a vacation after all.

The elevator hissed open into what used to be the plush corridor leading to the conference room of the command ellipse, but it was now naked steel and concrete, having been stripped clean of all embellishments. A brisk walk around the elevator column led them into the brains of TRES Corps HQ, Command & Control.

The cylindrical room followed the contours of the ellipse on the surface, but in fact it was constructed within the mountain, away from the central axis of the building and away from potential attack. It had two tiers, one a wide, railed catwalk circumscribing a central column consisting of multiple video screens and four wide-screen situation monitors, and a second tier set nearly a level below in which were the actual workstations, an arrangement often referred to as “The Pit” by the operators that routinely worked there.

This day, however, the Pit was empty save for a single operator and his sergeant. Felton looked up at one of the situation monitors, and a dead, gray screen looked blankly back at him. “Status,” he said, strolling out to lean against the closest rail.

“All levels report clear,” the sergeant said, parroting the report given to him by the operator. Felton nodded.

“Do it,” he said.

The sergeant leaned over the monitoring station. “Lock it down.”

“Aye sir, locking down.” The operator’s fingers moved deftly over the keyboard, and the building’s internal klaxons began to sound. Much of the command building’s facilities had been constructed underground, with the intent that it would be a secure fall-back point should the base ever come under serious attack. And now,

heavy blast doors designed to seal the underground facilities off from the surface were slamming into place, locking down with the intention of never being opened again.

“Level one, locked and secured. Level two, locked and secured,” reported the operator, as one-by-one, each of the building’s eleven floors were locked down. Felton and Davies turned as the heavy slam of metal reported in the hallway behind them, followed by the clunk of thick bolts ratcheting into place.

“Level eleven, locked and secured,” reported the operator. “Main elevator gates locked and secured. “We have fifteen minutes until command elevator is secured, fifteen minutes after that main sallyport entrance will lock and secure.”

“Alright,” said Felton. “This is it, then. Let’s turn off the lights. Authorization code Felton-Bravo-Thirteen.”

“Felton-Bravo-Thirteen, aye. Initiate main power shutdown,” said the sergeant.

“Shutting down main power, aye,” said the operating, fingers flying into action. The scream of the alarms was cut off abruptly as throughout the base, shunts opened and circuits were severed. Deep in the bowels of the mountain, the generators spun down, falling silent. The overhead lights of the C&C flickered and died, and the dim red emergency lights sparked to life on battery power.

“Time to go folks, lest we be locked in here with the rest of the junk,” said Felton.

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1999 11:00 AM

They had all gathered, what was left of them, on the parade field that morning. The traditional spot for this sort of thing, the amphitheatre of the compound’s main plaza, had already been filled in with concrete and plowed over with the surrounding earth, and the area surrounding the command pyramid had been cordoned off by tall concrete dividers in preparation for the work of the day.

Grand Admiral Felton climbed onto the flatbed that had been arranged as a makeshift stage, and stepped up to the podium stood at its tail. He looked out at the gathered people, many of them new, many of them faces he’d grown accustomed to over the years, all of whom he was probably looking upon for the last time. He leaned forward toward the mike, watching them.

“This,” he began, “...this is a day of great joy, but also is it one of great sadness. For while we celebrate that the world and its people no longer need our guardianship, that obsolescence brings about the pain we all share when forced to sever the ties that have bound us all together for so long. Such bonds as these can only be forged between those whom place their lives in the hands of each other and trust that they will be kept safe.

“Each of us knew this day was coming. We longed for it. We fought for it. To say the level of dedication each and every one of you have displayed was astounding would be an understatement. You’ve fought against insurmountable odds and

found victory. You've lost friends and comrades, all in the name of a Cause that world was not prepared to know. And yet you fought on. Not out of some need for recognition, some desire for glory, but out of righteousness. Your home was threatened, and you responded with great valor. You, my friends, are the saviors of humanity, and though the world does not yet know them, your sacrifices shall always be remembered.

"I know I haven't been your leader for long, but I have been a soldier, fighting the good fight for over three hundred and fifty years. I've fought alongside many a good man, and against the same, but you... you, my brothers, and my sisters, are the finest group of fighting men an women I've ever had the privilege to serve with in my long career, and given the choice, I would have no other. I salute you."

The Grand Admiral snapped off a salute, and as one, the former officers and soldiers gathered on the parade field returned it. The gesture made his heart swell with pride.

"Today, we lay the Corps to rest. This place, to many of us, has been the only home we've known for some time. I know it will always hold a special place in my heart. To those of you that have volunteered to remain here to aid in the final clean-up, I thank you. And to the rest of you... your retirement is well-deserved, and I wish the best to each and everyone one of you in whatever endeavors the rest of your lives bring. Dismissed."

And that was it. With no further ceremony, the remaining members of TRES Corps dispersed... and went off to whatever destiny had planned for the remainder of their lives.

Felton glanced dispassionately at his watch, and took a long, deliberate breath.

"Let the record show that as my final act as Grand Admiral, I am hereby authorizing the final deconstruction of the TRES Corps command headquarters. Time is 1200 hours exactly." He nodded at the combat engineer hunkered in front of a control box next to him. "Do it."

The engineer turned the key. With a dull thud, a plume of dust and debris erupted from the corners of base of the glass and steel pyramid. The smoked facade shattered, casting out a cloud that glittered in the noon-day sunlight. One-by-one, each of the levels followed suit, and Felton watched silently as his office at the apex was the last to go. The entire structure folded neatly in the middle, sliding down the hillside into a pile at the base of the bluff. The command ellipse, home to countless meetings of the Admiralty, clung desperately to the cliff face as its support fell away. The ring of charges circumscribing it detonated, and it too disintegrated, collapsing into the growing heap of rubble.

The cacophony of the crashing building had barely subsided when the charges buried high in the mountainside began to fire in series. With growing fury, a cascade of rock tumbled down the bluff, spilling over the horrible cross-section left in the wake of the demolition and burying the site in tons of granite. Felton waited in

reverent silence until the last pebble came to rest on the landslide.

It was some time before he spoke. “I, Kirk Felton, hereby stand down from the Grand Admiralship of the TRES Corps.” He turned to Admiral Davies— no, it was just Melanie Davies now— who had stood next to him, and removed his hard hat.

“So, Mel,” he said, putting on a weak grin. “What do ye say we go an’ get pissed? I’m buyin’.”

**VRDET BASE BLANCA**  
**FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24, 1999**  
**5:23 PM**

Everything was packed and ready to go. All the old VRDET equipment had been either locked away in the vaults or broken down for storage in the autofactory supply tanks. Most of the Rangers had said their goodbyes and walked away to find their own lives. By the end of the day, the Verthandic Rangers would cease to exist as an organization. In just under seven days, the Jihad to Destroy Barney itself would be formally dissolved.

A few had stayed behind to help the senior staff finish sweeping up and securing the base. Once that was done, they’d shut down the systems and let the base go to standby, buried under the mountain until the end of time. The day had been a melancholy affair, the Ranger cleanup crews mostly wandering around checking locked doors and talking in low voices. The senior staff had been equally out of sorts, though for the most part they performed their duties alone.

After shipping a few personal items to his new office in Denver and double-checking the transfer of Minerva, the base AI, to her new home in the same office building, Malaclypse the Seeker found himself in the Gate room, staring at the active wormhole sitting on the launch stage. The Gate itself would be the last thing powered down, as it was the only real way to get out of the base. Mal spent most of two hours just looking into the swirling ball of warped space-time, watching the occasional glimpse of strange new worlds flash through as the neutral-set Gate ricocheted across the multiverse.

It was, Mal thought, far better than anything on cable.

Mal’s reverie was interrupted by somebody tapping him on the shoulder. He blinked and turned to find Katze standing behind him, Ari’s cat form on her shoulder. “Penny for the old guy,” she said.

“I think I might’ve found Jimmy Hoffa.” That earned him an odd look from both of them, and Mal shrugged. “Just taking one last time to enjoy the view down the rabbit hole, is all.”

“Oh,” said Katze. “Well, c’mon, the troops are waiting for us in the auditorium. We’d better hurry, or they’ll get fed up and leave without us.”

The remaining Rangers gathered together in the main auditorium for one last

address from the command staff. Most of them had their discharge papers, various false documentations and whatever possessions they wanted to bring along for their mundane lives with them. Up on the stage, Katze, Ari, Damo and Mal surveyed the group. Of the thousand or so Rangers, only a hundred had stayed behind long enough to help put the base into mothballs.

Ari hopped up and walked over to the lectern. She tapped the microphone a couple of times and waited for the assembly to quiet down a little. When they had settled, she began her speech.

“Hi... I guess this is it, then. You all did great jobs, and we’re glad you decided to stay around for cleanup. So, um... take care and don’t do anything stupid. Thanks.”

Katze gave her friend an odd look as Ari relinquished the podium for her turn to address the troop. She said “Well...I see Ari has given us all incentive to keep our remarks brief. So here goes nothing. I hated to see this day arrive, because the Jihad in general and the Rangers in specific have been my life for the last little while, and I’ve been grateful for you all standing by each other and your leadership, even when sometimes we’ve not really had a clue either. Or, in one slightly embarrassing case, coming to rescue me when I was an idiot.” Katze smiled at the last line and a few folks smiled back.

“Let me spend a brief moment to thank my crew in Explorations, who have done so amazingly much to make me proud of what you’ve all done, and I’d like to thank Aris in the specific, who made my job a whole lot easier by being a pretty damned good XO. I’m going to miss you all, and it’s going to be hard to go back into Mundania after this, but we’re not the sort to quit, and I’m pretty sure that’ll apply to mundane life as well. Thanks, guys. It’s been a trip.”

Damocles stepped up to the podium next and cleared his throat. “Well, after those two speeches, I figure I have a lot more time to talk, so I’m going to ramble about whatever comes to mind for half an hour. No, hold the tomatoes, that was a joke. You know I’m not a speechwriter.” There was something of a nervous chuckle. “Seriously though. I’ve been with all of you for years and it’s been a privileged. Never forget what you’ve all accomplished, and never forget the ones who aren’t here. Thank you.” He stepped down and yielded the floor.

Mal stepped up and looked at the assembled Rangers. “Well, I guess I get to wrap things up. I don’t have much to say, really, so I’ll keep it short. For the last two years, we’ve been fighting the good fight together. Some of us were old hands who were with the Blood Jihad, some of us came from other JAOs, and a few were recruited by the Rangers. Now, we’ve finished the Good Fight. The bad guys picked up and left, and now we’ve got to figure out what we’re going to do with the rest of our lives.

“It’ll be tough going at first, but I know that you as Rangers can manage to pull it off with the same creativity that you showed when fighting the Hellwurm. And that’s what I want to say most of all; I am — we *all* are — extremely proud of each

and every one of you and the work you did. Hopefully, some day in the not too distant future the mundanes will get to learn about your accomplishments.

“That’s about it... oh. Before I finish, I want you to acknowledge those of us who went in and didn’t come home. One day, they’ll be remembered, too.”

Mal’s bearing changed as one by one, the official command staff of the Rangers stood up and came to attention. “By the unanimous vote of the Council,” Mal intoned, “and in accordance with the instructions of the Triumvirate, the Verthandic Rangers Dimensional Exploration Taskforce is hereby disbanded as a Jihad Autonomous Organization. All members are officially released from duty with full honors as of nineteen-hundred hours, December 24, 1999. All command level officers have resigned from their posts.

“Rangers: Dismissed!”

Soon enough, the base was essentially empty. The large open space of the main atrium echoed oddly without the everyday noise of Jihaddi going about their business. The three founding members of the Verthandic Rangers were clustered around the receptionist’s desk. Mal leaned against the desk, while Katze sat in the receptionist’s chair and Ari perched her cat form on Katze’s shoulder.

“Well, here we are,” said Mal, “just the three of us who started out together.”

“Yeah,” Katze said, “how long has it been, anyway? Feels like a lifetime.”

“Just over two years, really. Go figure. Anyway,” Mal said briskly, thumping the desk with his hand and straightening up, “no sense in putting this off any longer.” Mal pulled a silver key out his pocket and dropped it into a keyhole on the right side of the desk. Katze pulled out a similar key and placed it in a keyhole on the opposite side.

“On three. One... two.. Three!” They turned the keys clockwise. Something inside the desk made a loud mechanical CLUNK, and the lights in the atrium began to dim. In front of the desk, a rectangle of soft blue light appeared. And from the PA speakers the prerecorded stock voice of the base auxiliary computer began to speak.

“Attention. This. Base. Is now. In standby mode. All personnel. Please. Exit. Through. The main egress portal. The. Gate generator. Will shut down. In. Fifteen. Minutes.”

Mal gestured to the glowing portal. “Shall we?”

Ari hopped down off Katze’s shoulder and resumed human form, and the three of them walked into the light...

...and out into a snow-covered path at the foot of the mountain. A light snow continued to fall from the sky as the three recovered their bearings. “Huh,” Ari noted, looking up towards the clouds, “I thought you said it never snows around these parts, Mal?”

“Normally, it doesn’t,” replied Mal. “This is new. I think I’ll take it as an sign that

things are looking up.” He smiled faintly. “Where are you two headed?”

“Oh, I’m going somewhere, out there, anywhere,” Ari said breezily. “Places to do, things to go, you know how it is... I’ll probably be around if you call, but probably not.”

“Mmm,” agreed Mal. “How about you, Katze?”

“Back to Berkeley, I think. I want to finish up my undergrad career, actually get my diploma and then...” Katze shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Well, good luck to the both of you.”

*“History is not merely one damn thing after another, it’s the **same** damn thing over and over.”*

—EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

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## **5: The Long And Winding Road**

LONDON, ENGLAND  
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1999  
11:55 PM

Some cities are for beginnings, and some are for endings.

San Francisco is a city for beginnings. So is New York. Los Angeles is a city for endings. Paris can be both. London...

It was five minutes to midnight in London, the cafes and streets crammed with drunken Englishmen arguing football and politics and radiating general good cheer. Still, the group of five had managed to go relatively unnoticed in the private room of the Drunken Lion, a pub with a long and distinguished history of getting people drunk and keeping them that way.

The five people around the backroom table were rather melancholy for New Year’s Eve. The Scot and the Englishwoman had already downed a few pints each, and were singing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ to each other quietly. The two Americans were staying light on the brew, and the man with the untraceable accent was drinking in moderation but hadn’t completely lost track yet.

Finally, the door opened and the sixth member of the group walked in. Tall, rugged, and sporting a wizard’s hat, he took a seat backwards and grinned. “Sorry I’m late.”

“Glad you made it at all, Pupp,” Katze said. “How’s the campus?”

“The new elephants are great.”

“Whatever,” Melanie said. “Let’s get down to business. Finish business. Get the business finished.”

Aris pulled out a pocket recorder. “Final meeting of the Triumvirate council of the Jihad to Destroy Barney the Dinosaur,” she said, setting it in the center of the table. “Aris Merquoni, triumvir, present.”

“Kirk Felton, adjunct, presn’t an’ accounted fer.”

“Melanie Davies, here’n stuff.”

“Joe Schnieder, Mel’s adjunct, here for now, gone for later.”

“Rens Houben and Shadur, triumvir, present.”

“Katze Brenner, adjunct, present.”

“The time is 2357, December 31st, 1999,” Aris said, taking control as the least intoxicated Trium present. “We are here to confirm the shutdown, destruction, and concealment of all Jihad property and final dissolution of the Jihad.”

“Aye, TRES’s all shut down.”

“VRDET property has been recycled into the Mundane world, destroyed, or buried in Blanca mountain, which is on standby,” Katze said. “Commander Merquoni will act as caretaker for the indefinite future.” She glanced at Aris, who smirked and shrugged.

They ran through the list of other JAOs. It didn’t take very long. Finally, Aris said, “It is now 2359. I call for a vote on the dissolution of the Jihad. Merquoni, aye.”

“Felton, aye.”

“Davies, yeaah.”

“Schneider, eye.”

“Houben, aye.”

“Brenner, aye.”

“Motion passed. I declare this body dissolved.” She looked around the table. Outside, a countdown started. “Rest in peace.”

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

“Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind...”

**SATURDAY, JANUARY 1, 2000  
12:15 AM**

Katze left the party going on in the back room. Her thoughts were more all the finality of the moment, and it left her inclined not to be in a celebratory mood. She finally told Aris she’d be back in a little bit to take her back to Blanca, but that she wanted to walk out among the people for a bit.

Happy new year, she thought to herself. Everybody was going crazy about the numbers turning over to 2000 here, and in Marraketh tonight, they’d be celebrating year 566 arriving safely. But for some reason, with the symbolism of new years and

new beginnings weighed rather heavy on her conscience.

What was she going to do with her life now? She'd told Mal she was re-enrolling at school, to actually finish her degree, but then what? Was it time to stop avoiding the responsibilities she'd been avoiding to keep fighting in the war? Was the war really over?

She weaved her way through the crowd towards the door, when she thought she saw somebody waving at her from one of the dark corners of the main room. Katze blinked, and switched towards moving towards the table in the dark corner as opposed to the door. It took some work, but she finally made it and sat down across from the person there. "Fancy seeing you here," she said to her fellow VR founder. "Wanted to make sure we actually went through with it?"

Mal didn't bother to respond to the question, but the smile on his face seemed to imply that this was the case, and Katze continued. "Yeah, it's done. We're all civilians now." The little bit of alcohol she'd had earlier in the evening, combined with her melancholy thoughts, lead her to add, "The War's over. Time to go home."

"Go home?" Mal asked. "I thought you were going back to school."

"Yeah. Right now. But I'm really surprisingly not as far from a degree as I thought, I'll probably have it in a year. But then what? Go back to Marraketh? After this? Marraketh's nice, and it's home, but...it's not exactly what I'm used to, and I hate playing court games. Stay here? Eventually something is going to nag me bad enough that I'm avoiding my responsibilities. Surprised it hasn't started bugging me yet."

Mal nodded, just letting Katze have her say. "And the whole thing has been bothering me since May. What if it's a goddamned trick? Take us out of the ballgame, and then attack when there's no hope of calling us back together? There's people out there who don't have a clue and rely on those of us who do to save them, and we're no longer." She sighed, and put her head in her hands. "I'm sorry, I know we decided, as a group, that this was the best, but I'm worried."

The two of them looked at each other for a long time, and then Mal grabbed a pen and one of the napkins off the table. He scrawled a ten digit number on the napkin, wrote "In case of emergency" above it. He handed it to her, and said, "That should put you in contact with me at any point. If something happens, go ahead and call it. But only if it's really important."

"Yeah, I know, you've got a life to worry about as well." Katze folded the napkin and put it in her pocket. "You want to come party with the rest of us?"

"No, I'm fine," Mal said. "You go have fun."

Katze nodded and got up from the table. An impulse seized her, and she gave Mal a hug. "Thanks again, even if it was for no more than listening to me be morose."

"Not a problem. Good luck, Katze."

"You too, Mal." And Katze disappeared off into the crowds, wondering if the two of them would ever meet up again.

TRANSCRIPT OF "LARRY KING LIVE,"  
THURSDAY, AUGUST 24, 2000

*"Limitations are obsolete.' That's the motto of the company everybody's talking about these days, and they seem to be making good on their promises. Tonight on Larry King Live, we'll meet with Spiral Corporation CEO Dr. Jonathan Fnord and find out what limitations he's breaking today..."*

*"Q: With Spiral's growth accelerating, why not take the company public? You'd have investors lining up around the block..."*

*"FNORD: Companies go public to amass capital quickly. That's not my concern. Plus, the market is often a good way for wealthy individuals to engage in fraud and manipulative behavior in the pursuit of more money. Spiral's success can be attributed to our independence, and that independence would be weakened by a body of stockholders who are only interested in making money."*

*"Q: So, you're not interested in money, Dr. Fnord?"*

*"FNORD: Businessmen are interested in money, but that's not what I am. I'm a man with a vision for a better world, and the fulfillment of that potential is what drives me."*

*"Q: And yet you've become quite the corporate icon as of late..."*

*"FNORD: It's not a lifestyle that particularly interests me. It's a means to an end, nothing more. For a very long time, we've lived in a world where our governments routinely fail us, where our heroes have feet of clay, censored everywhere we go and where even the most trusted institutions are routinely being exposed as hopelessly corrupt."*

*"Q: I see..."*

*"FNORD: Spiral isn't following any trends. If anything, we're flying in the face of the current conservatism. But, therein lies the path to victory."*

*"Q: Sounds almost... militaristic."*

*"FNORD: Call it a benevolent war for the future. Every new product, each new idea, all bring us closer to the kind of planet that I think every*

*human being wants to inhabit. And if that's not a goal worth fighting for, I don't know what is."*

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2000**

"In a surprise move today, the United States Supreme Court decided that Arizona governor John L. Grover won the contested Presidential election today. Grover, the Republican challenger to incumbent Vice-President Al Gore, declared this a victory not only for himself, but for all Americans..."

~\*click\*~

**GREEK THEATRE,  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY  
WEDNESDAY, MAY 23, 2001**

Graduation ceremonies were proud moments for many people. The pomp, the circumstance, the black robes, the speeches...and the roll call of graduates. A small cluster waited for them to call the one whom they had come to see take the long walk across the stage. Luckily, given a last name so close to the beginning of the alphabet, they didn't have long to wait.

The chair of the department stepped forward. "As the chair of the psychology department, I am proud to present the bachelor of arts in psychology to the following students. As their name is called, if each student could cross the stage, I would like to congratulate him or her. Starting with Joseph Perry Allen...Rebecca Marie Altman...Ramon Arroyo y Lopez...James Paul Bates...Sandra E. Bleeker...Katze Janice Brenner..."

The small crowd assembled in the stone bleachers cheered loudly as their friend's name was called. It was quite the unbelievable moment for Katze, not only to have made it to this sunny day in May on this stage, shaking the department chair's hand, and basically having a degree.

And after it was all over, having Josh be the first to catch her, and giving him a kiss before the rest of the crowd could make it over. It was funny, the changes her life had gone through, from being Josh's best friend to being his worst enemy, and now having gone back through best friend and into the stage known as 'being massively in love with one another'. Neither was sure this was going to last, but it made her very happy.

Normal life was agreeing with her. She found this oddly strange, but wasn't going to fight it.

**VRDET BASE BLANCA  
AIRCRAFT STORAGE LEVEL  
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001  
09:00 AM LOCAL**

Aris stared at the television, letting the news sink in. For a long time, she didn't blink.

Then she reached out and pulled the antenna cable out of the wall. It ripped free with a spark and a squawk of static from the television.

"Goddamn humans," she muttered. "Can't even blame it on the Forces of Evil this time. Just... damn."

The dragon curled up in the dark and let the static sing her to sleep.

**FOX NEWS STUDIOS  
NEW YORK CITY  
MONDAY, JANUARY 15, 2002**

I lead a charmed life, Malaclypse the Seeker thought wryly to himself as he adjusted the microphone clipped to his tie. All around him activity buzzed as various flunkies and other assorted television creatures scurried around getting things ready for the imminent broadcast. To Mal's right, the host (Or as Mal had mentally tagged the arrogant little bugger, The Host.) was surrounded by makeup people trying to get his complexion rendered into something filmable.

The director called thirty seconds, and the crew scattered off the set. Mal prepared himself for the furious bullshitting to come. The camera lights winked on and the show began.

"Welcome to the O'Reilly Factor," the host barked into the camera. "Tonight in the no-spin zone, controversial CEO Dr. Jonathan Fnord. Dr. Fnord's company has been doing a lot to get in the public spotlight recently, and the good doctor himself has made some controversial statements as well. Dr. Fnord, welcome."

"I am overcome by joy to be here, Mr. O'Reilly."

"Let me get right off the bat and ask you this. Last week you rejected a contract to provide equipment to the Department of Homeland Security and accepted a contract to rebuild the power grid in Kabul. Why are you unwilling to work for America, Dr. Fnord?"

Oh, so it was going to be one of those conversations. "Simple enough, really. Kabul needs the work done, the DHS doesn't." Mal said.

"Now hold up, that's not an answer."

"Oh, you want more detail? Okay, I can do that. If Will LaFontaine wants Spiral computers for his office, then he can go down to CompUSA and buy them just like the rest of the country. On the other hand, infrastructure in Afghanistan has been spotty at best for the last two decades, and I'm an easy sucker for charity cases."

"Still, don't you think the people of America are entitled to the best security possible?" O'Reilly persisted.

“No spin zone.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing, just being ironic. In any case, Spiral doesn’t make law-enforcement products, Mr. O’Reilly. But I’m sure you know that.” Mal stared at his host, smiling slightly, daring the bluster to continue. Sensing that confrontation on that matter wouldn’t work very well, O’Reilly tried another angle.

“Okay, then how about this. Yesterday in an interview for Newsweek you said that the President - and I quote - ‘was the worst possible man for the job at the worst possible time.’ Would you care to defend that statement?”

Mal let his smile widen and show teeth. This was going to be more fun than he had anticipated.

**ATHENA HEAVY INDUSTRIES  
KINGMAN, ARIZONA  
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 1, 2003  
3:00 PM**

“Uggh... I feel like shit.” Dee was curled up on the floor of the Athena Heavy Industries shop, on a pile of what were probably greasy rags. She groaned and managed to open one eye enough to see her business partner duct-taping a paper sign up by one of the CNC machines.

“Due to the events of New Year’s 2003 and the creation of the Jagd-Segway, there will be no designs created while under the influence of alcohol,” Damocles read, evidently in only slightly better condition.

Oh yeah. She remembered last night when, after the fireworks, she’d had the idea to militarize the prototype Segway that she’d had shipped to them a few months before because of a ‘computer error’. The knobby tires made sense in a way, but the machinegun mount had probably been a bad idea. Definitely had been; she remembered the thing spinning around in circles from the recoil, spraying fire and lead in all directions and her cackling in glee before she had to stop it to be sick. Of course, Damo had wanted a try after that, and he managed to knock it over onto its back. At some point they’d both evidently made it back inside without being shot.

“Won’t argue that one... new head now, please? This one is killing me.”

**SPIRAL BUILDING  
DENVER, COLORADO  
FRIDAY, JANUARY 23, 2004**

Mal regarded the two engineers fidgeting before him. “Okay,” he said, “just calm down and take it from the top. What did you do that’s so earth-shattering?”

“Yessir, well sir,” began the elder of the two, “we were working with some of that new quantum mechanics widgets you were showing us last year. You know, the causal channel stuff? Well, we got to thinking, and we started expanding the scope of the system until we had a full-fledged teleport device ready for use.”

Mal nodded. **Min?** he called on his neural lace.

**I'm here.**

Mal quickly replayed the last few seconds of conversation through the lace. **Does this check?**

**Looks that way. From their notework, I think they've replicated the hyper-park system in part. Not bad for a gaggle of mundanes.**

The two engineers waited expectantly for Mal to say something. Mal blinked and smiled. "Congratulations are in order, I think," he said. "Naturally we won't be releasing any of the practical details - we are *not* ready to reap the shitstorm inherent in commercial teleportation - but your team has permission to publish the theoretical work."

"Um, well sir, that's not all," said the younger engineer. Mal lifted an eyebrow. "You see, we were testing the limitations of the initial system, teleporting stuff back and forth across the lab, when we had the idea of seeing what the mass constraints were. So we went out and bought a car from the junkyard and teleported it just before we came up here. It was supposed to go from the garage to a spot we cleared in the lab, but..."

"But?" Mal prompted.

"But it's not there, and we have no idea *where* it went."

**PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY-NAVY WARSHIP GUANGZHOU  
SOUTH CHINA SEA  
SATURDAY, JANUARY 24, 2004**

The entire crew had come out to look at the ship's new passenger. Nobody knew when It had showed up, only that one minute the space beside the ship's Ka-28 helicopter had been empty, and the next minute It was sitting alongside the copter.

The captain had gone nuts when informed that It was onboard. The sudden appearance of It had thrown the ship into utter confusion; enough confusion to reassure the captain that his crew hadn't had anything to do with It's arrival. As it was, the *Guangzhou* was sailing back to port for a thorough investigation by the People's Republic of China Security Forces. After all, *somebody* had just placed a 1972 Volkswagen Beetle on the helicopter deck, and nobody knew *why*.

*“In the end?” Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.”*

—DR. JONATHAN OSTERMAN

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## 6: Lives In Transition

*In a city on a golden shore, the Savior of a people went about the ordinary life she chose...*

*In another city on the far side of the world, a soldier went through the motions of an ordinary life, trying to put his past behind him...*

*At the top of a skyscraper, the world’s most dangerous man watched the sunrise and planned things to come...*

*Under the roots of a mountain, two dragons – one flesh, the other metal – slept, waiting for changes in the world...*

*In the shade of a great forest, two beings with the same body savored the wind as it slipped through the trees...*

*In a small house on the heath, an old warrior relaxed with his lady, free of obligations for the first time in a long time...*

*Somewhere entirely different, a wizard went about his daily routine...*

*All across the world, thousands of men and women who were once soldiers kept a mundane life free of worry...*

*And in a place distant from the Earth, the leader and god of a race of mages looked through a crystal at the world he had sworn to destroy, and contemplated his next moves.*

*It had been a long time since he had last looked at that world, but the time and the hardship that lay between then and now had been worth it.*

*Charn'El smiled to himself. The damage caused by that imbecilic creature had finally been repaired, and now he was once again free to act against the White Death and the pitiful humans who they protected. The plan was in place, all the pieces arranged. All he had to do was give the command, and the final game would begin.*

*He would set his herald against the White Death, destroying them before they could recover from the shock. He would let the creature loose once more to act as his cat's-paw, let it burn itself out fighting the humans before he destroyed it once and for all. And once the humans were ensnared by the creature and demoralized by his herald, then Charn'El would be free to convert these creatures from a prophesied menace into the slaves they rightly should be.*

*The humans would fall before the might of Lyra, or they would die.*

*Charn'El considered either outcome totally acceptable.*