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Über mag

The Entropia Universe® lifestyle magazine

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Editorial by Nirfu



Welcome to the 4th Über Mag. I have become a drama queen and the cause of that is the VU 9.0. In my oppinion this really showed that Entropia Reality as I once learned to like does no longer exist. I have had this feeling before after other VU's, and the sad thing is that is have not left me, only grown for each "adjustment" MA has done. So I think this will be the last Über Mag. I have

stopped updating my guides at <http://nirfu.gluonsoft.se>. I could have just left Über Mag no4 unreleased, but I felt that you could at least get the chance to see the work in progress. I send a big thanks to all people that have made the previous issues possible to make. The aticles in this issue is in some cases not finished and will never bee.

As you might understand, there will not be a competition in this issue.

On the picture above, you see my lost me, the one that no longer exist. Somehow now I have dark skin and no more mohawk and I refuse to ware clothes for the time being, that might change in the future, right now it feels like the right thing to do.

The Über Mag office will be closed.

Nirfu

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Silva, estate decorator

You decorate estates for other players, right?

Yes, I have mostly decorated apartments but have also put a shop display together and I am currently helping Bartolo with his new skills shop whilst also doing his advertising artwork.

How did you come up with the idea?

It all started when my good friend Invi from my old soc showed me his flat (TI City Platinum 2A) which was a store room with a small area set with a couple of arm chairs and a lamp. The rest of the place was a dumping ground complete with a dung heap in the first corner you saw as you entered the room (this he blamed on the cat lol). It just so happened I met a chap as I was chatting outside sitting on the grass who was called Tarrith (the leader of the Drow) and he said he stayed in the same building and showed me his place which was very impressive. I then took Invi to see this flat and he commented on how he would like to have a nice place but has no idea what to do, and being a good pal to me I said I could help him on that front. And that was that, we spent a week sorting stuff out and going to the shops for the right kind of items to give the oldie worldie Jules Verne feel which he wanted. After that I was asked to do you soc flat (Bilton Towers 2 fl 3B) up too and it just kind of snowballed from there. As I developed different ideas and styles I found myself making some unusual chairs and furniture also, and thus came the Fantasy Furniture range.

When you choose what to put in the estate, what do base the ideas on?

It all depends on what the client wants as an overall feel. Some people like clean lines with not much fuss and others like a more Gothic style. So I discuss with the clients what it is they are looking for or what the room is to be used for. I also say that if I put something together in the room or a mural that they don't like then to tell me and we can work together so that they are happy with the result, after all artwork is kind of a personal thing and what one person loves another person may just hate. The hardest thing to deal with is the item count / lighting count limit.... always I want more!

I suppose that you can do a lot if you have lots of PEDs?

Well, obviously if there are more peds available then the larger furniture items can be bought as matching sets, or indeed I can build

some fantasy furniture for a completely different look, or unusual skulls/items can be added. However, a room can still look nice with using a lot of everyday things eg. skulls or bones and growth molecules and energy matter. These are not expensive items, it is the time it takes to place them and come up with the design that costs in that case.

If the estate owner doesn't have so much money, how do you do?

I can either take installments for payment so the cost is spread over several weeks/months, or I can come and do a bit at a time when they have some money to spend on their apartment. It is easy to be flexible on this as I understand not everyone has 3K ped to shell out in one payment. Sometimes it is a case of waiting until the client can afford or even find a specific furniture item that they want to have in their apartment, so it call all be built up in stages.

Is your service very expensive?

Not for the amount of hours I put in, some days it can be +10 hrs straight, stopping only for trips to the loo or to the fridge for food or alcohol! I also do a lot of running around finding items that are required too, as most clients just don't have the interest or want to spend time searching for the right things. Though during this period is also when I am getting the feel for the room and putting ideas together as part of the design process.

In the Über mag office I did make a bar out of Jamora shelf and stink tree boards, have you done inventions like that?

Oh yes, I can now make wall shelves/tables from the boards and free standing sculptures, fantasy stools, thrones, sofas, table lamps/wall lamps/ wall torches, head boards for beds and customize ready made furniture. All of which use a variety of pedestals, ammo, peds, skins, horns, skulls and other looted objects.

Do you earn anything from your estate refurbishing?

Yes of course I do, I get paid for my time and creativity, as any designer would do or indeed anyone with a career in EU (and real life also). I have also had spin offs on the creative side two with selling my artwork (some arty in game shots and some real life drawings) that I have imported onto frames.

What is the price?

This is the hardest question to answer, kind of goes along with what we used to say in the engineering world (when I was a mechanical engineer/draughtswoman) 'How long is a piece

of string?' I can't put a set price on a room because there are many deciding factors and although there are only a few specific room shapes/sizes each one ends up totally different and therefore has different item/time/design costs. Some of the variable cost factors are eg. how much appropriate furniture the person has to start with, what needs to be added/coloured or re-coloured, what style are they looking for, how arty do they want the look, do they want hand built items rather than manufactured ones?

How does it work, do you tell what the estate owner should buy or do he hand you the budgeted amount?

Both actually. Sometimes I start with a completely empty flat and it can be nice for both myself and my client to spend a little time at the auction discussing the items they are looking for as we both look on the same page. Other times I am adding to what they have and I tell them some specific items I need. Other times I have what I need in my own stock and can pull it from there. Usually though it is a combination of all of these, as clients also like to be part of the design process and be involved and I have made some very good friends as we become involved in this design process. It is a real bonus.

What do you think MA would change in the estates?

I have no idea what MA are likely to change with regards to lighting effects, eg, ceiling lamps are really dim and atrax parts glow like a supernova (I had to change some of my designs due to this disastrous effect and have helped numerous people sort their lighting because they have one bone or skull that shines like a beacon but didn't know where the light came from) or they sometimes re-shape or re-size an item. Again I had to re-think some of my designs when they did that too! And lost a beautiful blue fire effect when they de-animated growth molecules, which was real shame as I really liked having what looked like blue fire above the pedestals at the corners of my Temple Goddess bed. If you are asking me what I would like them to change then that is easy... more item count and more light source count. Possibly even to be able to decorate walls/floor in the entrance corridor. I have written to them about both the blue fire effect and also to see if perhaps if they can't up the item/light source limit, they could implement a system where you pay a little more rent per month to allow a larger item/light source count. This suggestion my already have been filed under B for Bin, but I live in hope :)

What items do you miss?

I would like to see more coloured lights. I love the effect of the blue light from the weapons and the red wall lamp (not so keen on the design of the red floor lamp/table lamp) though the red wall lamps seem to be fairly rare now. It would be great if there were other coloured light sources eg, a range of cozy candles (I use cozy candles more than anything so a few more of those in circulation would be good also) which have different coloured flames (green, purple, yellow, orange etc) that send out that colour of light source on the walls/ceiling etc. It would also be good to be able to say stack two jamora shelves one on top of each other to make tall units, or put floor lamps upside down coming from the ceiling or hang a rug on the wall. A working animated fountain/water feature would also be a nice touch to have in an indoor garden area. Ah well, I can dream can't I?

Which estate you have made is you most pleased with?

Pfffff.... now that is a hard thing to ask an artist, especially since they all turn out so different. I love Bartolo's place (Genesis - up the hill 1A) as it has a luxurious classy feel, but I also love GunOil's 'zones' (TI City Gold 14 D & E) because they have a more gothic/hunter appeal and are a little insane.

Why?

I get a real kick out of doing this as it is exciting to see how an idea develops...and quite often ends up not as was originally imagined which gives me a nice surprise too! I love all arty things to do with colour and shape and now see objects in EU in a whole new light, and wonderfully enough, some of my clients have started to see everyday stuff in this new light also and have learned a little about art and design as I demonstrated what works and what doesn't and explain why it doesn't work too. :)

If I used your service and then changes what you did, would you be offended?

Offended no, sad maybe, concerned that I didn't get the design totally to the clients satisfaction definitely. If it is during the actual design process, well this happens lots as the client and I work together. The only thing is if it is after I have finished and left, and the apartment is left open and I have permission to show it to other people, I then have to point out any changes that are not of my design. But that is no big deal. I have a client who asked me to come and fix his lighting problem when the last vu came in and the horns I used glowed like the sun, thus destroying the romantic lighting I had created. I noticed he

had added a few other pieces of furniture and it did look nice and enhanced what I had already made. I told him this too! After all it is their home and they are free to tweak it in whatever way they would like, or indeed tear it all down and sell the items.

Is there any special skill involved in your “profession”?

Yes, apart from the arty colour shape balance feely thing and the 'I wonder if that would work?' thing, there are some technical skills required.... my Temple Goddess Voodoo Magic as I call them. Oh, and lots of patience!

Don't call me sexist now, but I suppose you have an advantage as a female in this profession?

LOL well, don't call me sexist either, but as a male you need to define advantage! My main advantage I think, comes from being able to do something different, that the client likes/wants, to come and go with changes they make and to generally (unless I'm having a seriously bad day) have a happy bubbly personality who loves the company of people with a good sense of humour.....now I'm not sure how much my anatomical make up has to do with that... maybe it is a girlie thing after all, I suppose dudes skill up on Action man and war games as kids and girlies like doll's houseswhat can I say I'm guilty as charged!!!

What is the thing you absolutely not should put in an estate?

DUNG!!! in no way shape or form.

What is your favourite item to use?

Merp sails!!! (anyone who has merp sails please don't tt them!!) and glowy stuff eg. ME, growth, energy matter though as I think of the things I love to use the list is getting longer by the second.

After the last VU I got a huge light change in my apartment, before it was almost impossible to get light in it, is this something you too did experience?

Oh God yeah, big style. As I have mentioned earlier, and it took some figuring out when I walked into my own apartment, it is mainly the armax range, though there are a few mutant skulls that cause it too. Some will glow when rotated between the 4o'clock and the 12o'clock position but are fine in the rest of the arc of the circle of rotation. My advice is pick up all the armax and if the light does not go then start on the other mutant stuff. Once the light has gone place each item one at a time back in the room to see which are the offending pieces.

Do you think there are enough good furniture crafters out there?

I would have to say no, there are only a few and it can be really hard to find supplies of specific things. I always need curtains (mostly Katu range), sometimes quite a lot of them, and I am currently trying to track down a few good suppliers who not only can make these items but will sell to me at more of a trade price since I use so many. Also colourists that can do a good range of colours are hard to find also.

Why just estates, you could expand and do “dress up” consulting?

Emm, dress up as in clothes? Or do you mean shop display? I am open to all kinds of design/colour consulting and have indeed given consultation to several people now. I also have created signature banners, adverts (static and video) and in general any kind of artwork anyone would like to have.

Describe the common customer of yours?

Oh let me see, handsome wearing a hat and long coat with boots and usually shades!lol I'm teasing you now! Although a lot of my clients do in fact look like this ;) Usually a male hunter/miner who would like something different but has not got the time or inclination to do it themselves. Of course, that is not exclusive, all manner of people come to me for advice or artwork. We are all individuals after all.

How much does the average customer spend if he uses your service?

There is no average here, could be from 300peds to 6K peds.

What is your fee?

Again this really depends on the complexity of the design, the rarity of the items use within the design and how long the whole thing takes. It really is very hard to quantify especially as a house design has fluidity to it and none have as yet been similar to each other. Also as things get to the more defined tighter stages I get absorbed and engrossed in what I'm doing and end up forgetting to log the hours or look at the clock even. Oh, I need a manager! I'm just an arty chick!!

Please list your top 5 estates

Tl City Platinum 2A
Bilton Towers 2 3B
Genesis Tower E 1A (one up the hill)
Tl City Gold 14 D (up hill to right of auction)

Powerful wormhole chip

I think most of you know the powers of a Tele Porter chip, but if I told you there is the equivalent of a TP chip bus; travel as many as you like, all over the continent. The Wormhole is the ultimate mass transportation tool. There are only about 100 available at today's date and they use 678 Mind Essence for each successful opening of a wormhole. The wormhole is a kind of tunnel the Wormhole chip owner creates between himself and anybody on his friend list. When the wormhole is established anyone can enter and move from one end of the wormhole to the other. The hole is open for about 20 seconds. The hole is open in booth ends so people can travel in booth direction at the same time, even the one who opened the hole can travel, this makes it a convenient way to for example go rescue a friend stuck at an outpost. Either you open the hole so the friend can come to you or you enter the hole and go to the stranded



friend and then blast your way through the bad Troxies together.

The wormhole can only operate on the same continent and the one who opens the wormhole and the friend need to have open space in front of them. You cannot open a wormhole from inside a house. The rumors say that there once was possible to open a wormhole to CND, if this is true or not is hard to tell. If you now feel the urge to get your own wormhole chip you need to gather at least 3000 PED and if that was not enough you also need at least 19.9 in teleporting skill to be able to use it. It will take you lot of teleporting to get to that level. If you like you also can use a Focus chip or a Nerve Blast chip since they give the skills needed.

There is also a limited wormhole chip, it's slightly more economic to use since it only uses 670 Mind Essence, but the backlash is that there is only one reported dropping. The limited version only holds for 140 – 360 uses. Looting a wormhole chip is very uncommon; the last time I know of was in VU 8.6.1. And maybe in the future it's only the limited version that will drop, so if you are the owner of a non limited version; hold on to that!



*"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want
He makes me down to lie
Through pastures green He leadeth me the silent waters by.
With bright knives He releaseth my soul.
He maketh me to hang on hooks in high places.
He converteth me to lamb cutlets,
For lo, He hath great power, and great hunger.
When cometh the day we lowly ones,
Through quiet reflection, and great dedication
Master the art of karate,
Lo, we shall rise up,
And then we'll make the bugger's eyes water."
Roger Waters
Animals, Sheep, 1977
Capitol Records*

one

Dry heaves first thing in the morning.

I'm used to the shock of being jolted awake in a cold sweat by that damn dream, but these new revelations shock and sicken me, twisting my guts like a vise. An assassin? Me? The thought that I could do such a thing in cold blood makes me nauseous. Not to mention, I sucked back a lot of questionable booze the night before. I wake feeling a morbid sense of shame and disgust and my head is spinning with the vertigo of motion sickness from a repetitive dream in which I both kill and am killed in the end.

Quickly, urgently, I scramble from under my jacket to my hands and knees, my guts constricting, forcing anything and everything in my stomach up and out. Only a thin film of bile and spit and a lot of ugly heaving sounds make their way out of my gapping mouth. Oh fuck, I feel like shit.

"Suck it up mate!" a voice shouts in the early morning distance and then laughs. Fucking heartless prick, I think, as I spit the hot sinewy bile from my mouth into the sand beneath my face, before I'm stricken with another wave of gut wrenching convulsions.

Raising my heavy, pounding head I look around to get my bearings, squinting my swollen eyes against the blinding brightness of the Colypsonian morning. I'm going to need another drink just to get rid of this monster hangover from last night's binge. Raising my hand to shade my eyes, still unsure of my location in space and time, still unsure if I'm alive or dead, the words above my head slowly come into focus, **Welcome To Fort Fury** is scrolled in large, faded letters on the beat up old sign over head, an appropriate name considering the history of this place and how I'm feeling at the moment.

I've been camped here, outside the main gate so long now I have what amounts to a semi-permanent home in this forsaken waste of a town, a slight depression in the dirt where I always crash at the end of the day, my tattered jacket for a blanket and my kit for a pillow, everything I own within easy reach. This place in the dirt is, as much like home to me as any since I came to Calypso, my back knows all the lumps and cracks in the dry, desecrated earth. I guess I'll be looking for another piece of dirt to lie down in tonight; can't sleep in the stink of my own vomit.

I bought last night's booze from a local trader, a guy named Zee, brewed, he

claimed from *fresh, locally farmed* ingredients, my guess is distilled Melchi Water and the stomach contents of a dead, bloated exca he found washed up on the riverbank somewhere. Though I've had that dream a hundred times before, it's never left me feeling like this before, no matter how much I've had to drink the night before.

I wonder what the hell that dream is all about and why I keep having it over and over again? I'd shake it off if I could. A woman, I'm sure I've never seen before and a place I can't remember ever being, no way to tell who she was and why I was there, if I ever was really there at all. Why did I kill her? In the dream we seemed to care for each other so much. It's all very confusing.

If I had the right implant I wouldn't need to sleep for long periods of time, but there's not much of anything else to do around this shit hole. When I'm not hunting or panning for precious ores, I'm drinking and fighting, or fighting and drinking with the other settlers and sleep is the only escape from the misery of my existence. Until the dreams started sleep was the only escape.

I check my jaw for any indication that I got into a scrap last night that I haven't remembered yet. No new soreness, just the scruffy overgrown beard I haven't wasted the time to try to shave off for a week now. No new teeth missing either. The constant hammering in my skull is the result of too much tainted liquor and nothing more.

For the time being, the world seems to have stopped whirling around me. Slowly, and painfully I get to my booted feet, only to generate another wave of nausea and spinning. With hands held out to balance my uneasy feet, I make my way to the low wall we've been using here as a latrine. Seems to work just fine too. The dry earth sucks the moisture from my waste almost instantly, leaving little evidence of my purgation, but a small, darkened crater in the dust.

I glance around at the dozen or so sleeping bodies camped around the teleportal, looking for the smart ass with the big mouth. Still a little unbalanced I scan the crowd, all sensory perception skills coming slowly into full activation, clouded by this hangover to

beat all hangovers.

A Faucevex growls out in the Wastes, it's low rattling grunt travels far in the thin morning air. Its call is answered a moment later, well south of the camp, a call to mate or hunt, or both who really knows. They live with only one purpose, to kill humans; they breed with only one purpose, to make more human killing beasts. Good thing I don't have to take a dump. More than a few guys wandered too far from camp to relieve themselves and never came back.

The mutated creatures here don't seem to need sleep the way we humans do, most species only stay in one spot for short periods of time, to graze or get their bearings before they turn and move off again. They don't normally migrate over larger areas. Some never seem to move at all, preferring rather to conserve their energy until; startled, they spring seemingly out of nowhere to make a kill. Even the most docile beasts become enraged killers and unless you can defend yourself well, you never want to stray too close to any of them.

I feel the vibrations of movement too far away to recognize, but nothing close up. Perception is a tricky sense, not natural to the human form, it's an enhanced skill developed through the skill storage faculty of a built in neurological implant provided by *The Company* to help each settler survive in a hostile environment. You can sense movement over the horizon, but you can't tell whether it's friend or foe. Each of the settlers has perception built into their compliment of skills, though it's difficult to trust, you may have heightened physical senses, taste, smell, hearing, for example, but it's hard to trust a "feeling" you might have about an area and usually only leads to feelings of indecision and paranoia.

From where I'm standing by the latrine wall the local degenerates scattered around outside the camp gate at Fort Fury look pretty much the same. Over in one area you have your dirty, ugly, abandoned souls and over by the fort wall you have your filthy, pathetic, desperate masses. I belong to the former category. Small groups of the nasty, diseased and lost are peppered throughout both groups, just to even out the mix. All in

all a pretty rotten bunch of useless scum, but most of them look and sound like they are still sleeping, no doubt untroubled by terrifying nocturnal scenes of murder and galactic catastrophe.

This town isn't really the best place for the kind of work I do. I'm a miner, mostly for the black-market ore trade. I work the shallow banks of the Acheron River. Few decent merchants ever make their way this far inland, some have attempted the journey, but few have ever made it. The terrain between Twin Peaks and Fury is formidable and includes a vast mountain range, raging river and untold other dangers. When they do get here, the merchants haven't stayed very long. Fort Furry is only a resting place between Twin Peaks and the bigger market on the west coast of Eudora at Port Atlantis.

Fury was originally meant as a trading outpost to service the river barges plying the waters between Argus in the north and The Harbor of Troy in the south, back when the river was wide enough and deep enough for shipping, back before the Robot Wars.

Occasionally you get some crafter here looking for a sack of ugly rocks and willing to pay better than market rate for it, but then they turn around and try to sell you a tool they made or a weapon they crafted at ten times the going market rate. Everything out here has a price and the price is usually way too high. Greed, deception and prevarication are the norm when dealing with most of the population, few settlers have any sense of honor and fewer still ever seem to act on it.

We are all opportunists here, one way or another, put on this planet by *The Company* to build some semblance of a balanced economy and a basic social infrastructure for the millions we are told will be coming to inhabit this planet in the future, but this planet has many deep underlying problems. The mutants for one, the "mob" we call them. Mutant animals and humanoid like creatures breeding like crazy in the wilderness. Every, damn one of them a viscous, blood thirsty predator from birth, few of them can be tamed, so that there's no safety outside a protective ring of heavily armed, high power turret guns that surround every settlement.

Another real and ever present danger comes from the *Bots*. The Robot Wars never really ended. At its height it lasted for a hundred years and then, out of the blue, as quickly as it began the robots just picked up and left. A thousand years before I arrived on the scene there was a momentary respite from wave after wave of robot destruction that pretty nearly obliterated the earliest human inhabitants of Calypso. Lying waste the cities of the day and almost completely destroying the entire human population, the original inhabitants of Calypso, to whom we pay tribute.

They brought it on themselves we're told, sophisticated but naive, they tried to process an encrypted message they thought was a signal from their own lost probe through a base matrix on Calypso. The message turned out to be a contaminated program instructing the original robot pre-settler construction force to turn on their human controllers. This threat from an alien race light years away was not only targeted and determined to destroy the people of Calypso, but also and ultimately, the entire human population everywhere.

The aliens, whoever they are, are determined to destroy us all. Their army, our own machines, are always up to something and maybe planning a new initiative to strike at us again at any moment, these fighting machines are all over the place, looting the planets resources, raiding cities and killing people everywhere. There are at least as many of them as there are humans, with much heavier firepower than we have and worse still, they can build more copies of themselves. Bigger, ever better robot models; more efficient destroyers to attack the human strongholds are being built in a factory on the continent of Amethera right now. Looting save us all when they decide to start the wars again.

Every now and then, when it's least expected the bots attack the cities again, combining their forces to wreak havoc, killing thousands, maiming and blinding thousands more. Destroying any sense of security the population might try to maintain. The planet has become a prison, only the strongest can wander out into the *Wastes*

and even they are not free to live their lives in any kind of lasting peace. Our alien enemies, believed to be from a distant galaxy, hundreds or thousands of light years away, don't just want us gone, they want us dead, every last mother's son of us.

"Mother", that's a word you don't hear much these days. If there ever were children in this place, they and any evidence of their existence are long gone. We, the settlers, are all the product of a huge re-spawn industry. We've lost our ability to produce young, not through lack of trying mind you, not even by artificial means. Any history books that I've seen do not describe when this change took place or why. I've heard that there are some scientific studies being attempted to change this sad fact, but there have been no mothers, no fathers and no children here for countless generations. I myself was re-spawned some three years ago and with the normal life span being so short, there are few left now who remember the days that came before that. I plan on living out my whole life span and hopefully a whole lot more if I can, but every day brings a new set of challenges and at least one new enemy.

I look the group over, trying to get an indication of who might have had the nerve to say anything during my earlier embarrassment. I'm not looking for a fight at the moment, but one might find me if I don't assert my strength, or at least threaten to do so. This isn't the kind of place where weakness of any kind is ignored for long.

A few other early risers, mostly junkies, huddle over by the fort gates, waiting for them to be opened so that they can re-stock or sell their loot at the trade terminal or to the auctioneer stationed inside; too far away to have heard me barfing up my breakfast though.

My new nemesis is well hidden in amongst the crowd of early morning sleepers, until I spot his sombrero. Sitting up against a structural member on the opposite side of the teleportal, the wide brim of his sombrero pulled down low over his eyes. I can just make out the unshaven bottom half of his ugly face and a wide, dirty smile I know is meant to goad me even more. In his mouth

he's holding an unlit piece of an old chewed up cigarillo. With a flick of his left hand he sparks the sulfur tip of wood match with a practiced thumbnail and lights what's left of his smoke. This whole time he's been aware of my every movement. He knows where I'm standing and he knows that I've left all my equipment and my weapon behind and now he knows that I've spotted him. His right hand is concealed under a bundle he holds in his lap. Most likely gripping the butt end of an activated laser pistol, ready to react in a split second if I try anything.

Now that I've located him I can plan my attack or defense, as the case may be, though I'm not quite finished relieving myself. The phosphorescent colour of my piss and the smell of rocket exhaust coming up from between my feet confirm my feeling that last night's moonshine was more of pharmacy than farm. It did the trick though, I can't remember a damn thing and my skull feels as though it could explode. If I get my hands on the trader who sold it to me, I'm going to give him a taste of his own medicine with the heel of my boot.

"Kinda smells funny don't it?" sombrero says over the distance between us, cocking his head slightly my way he slowly blows out the flame on his light, "I wouldn't drop a match if I was you" then he laughs again and spits a blob of black saliva into the dirt just beyond the ends of his crossed legs and well worn boots, "You might burn off what's left of your pecker". This comment causes him to break out into a fit of laughter so hard that after a moment he is forced to cut his laughter short to catch a breath, before breaking into a fit of heavy coughing then horking up another black glob and sends it flying slightly further than the first.

Despite his seemingly good nature I get the sense that he is fully aware of his surroundings and quite serious about his purpose here, only using humor to draw my attention, the hand hidden under his bundle concerns me though. All of a sudden he cocks his head in the other direction, as though hearing something. This I take as further provocation, he's up to something, acting very suspicious, hiding his weapon, ready to react and I'm still standing here by the low wall, unarmed, no useful weapon in

my hands and my pants still undone.

My weapons, ammo and body armor are several feet away. Even without this hangover I would never be able to run the distance to grab my pistol before this guy, even with poor aim, would be able to put a few laser cells right through me.

Pretending to ignore him I casually button up my pants and slowly make my way back towards my kit, not wanting to seem threatening and cause him to accidentally blow me away, I casually go down on one knee to adjust the straps on my filthy boots. These boots were custom made for the guy I killed to get them and I'm pretty proud of them. He was after my scalp for some ridiculous insult during a bar brawl. I called him a *noob* of all things. Who would have thought that a simple word could get a guy so riled up? Apparently though, he was. The boots run well enough for me, perhaps the original owner would still have them if he had used them to do just that. They have kept me alive on a number of occasions.

A few moments later, satisfied that this sombrero-wearing fool isn't aiming to blow me away just for shooting practice, I look up in the same direction he seemed to have his attention so fixated, my bootstraps secure I gaze across the wasted landscape to the northern horizon, that's when I first saw her. At first I thought it was an illusion. Way off in the shimmering light on the horizon and running fast towards Fort Fury. Long and thin, with the poise of a Thoroidian Equus. Speeding in from the Black Lands off to the north, a long thin trail of dust kicked up and hanging in the stagnant air behind her. Tall and proud looking, even from this distance I can tell she would stand at least a full head taller than even the tallest of any of the men gathered outside the Fort Fury this morning.

Groggy headed and still very hung-over I give my head a little shake and close my eyes tight, thinking what I was seeing might be a trick of the light, a mirage caused by heat waves radiating off the black, burnt soul, but when I opened them again she is 20 paces closer and coming towards Fury fast. O.A. for sure, I think, *Alpha Class*, of the *Old Order*, pure blood, with no mutant mix in her gene pool, this was immediately

obvious by her poise and length of her gate. This was the reason for my perception of movement a while ago and the cause of Sombrero's distraction.

Getting up, I stand there, mouth agape, staring at her instantly mesmerized, completely transfixed, as though I had never seen a female before. I've seen plenty of women here on Calypso since my re-spawn, most of them were sex changed dudes who thought when they signed their contracts in their past lives that their future lives in the re-spawn would be cheaper as a female, until they realized they would be harassed, fondled and molested by every hump junkie and slammer on this loot forsaken rock.

As I watch her, my friend in the sombrero forgotten for the moment, a little smirk begins to grow at the corners of my mouth; the smirk grows into a full smile in anticipation as she draws closer and closer to town. She's running with purpose, not out of fear, leaping with effortless ease over the huge bombed out craters created by the violence of an earlier age, her arms pumping her clenched fists back and fourth, one gripping a pistol and her powerful legs pounding the ground beneath her.

Despite my chipping scars, on a few well-hidden locations, I'm not an unattractive man and I love to talk to the ladies, especially the real ones. Of course my smile wasn't the only thing beginning to grow that morning. I began to hum to myself the lyric from a long remembered jukebox song I often heard in Haven, "My girl is a **gamer chick**, I really love her so..." and whistled softly through my teeth.

Dressed entirely in Salamander from head-helmet to harness to the longest pair of leg guards I've ever seen, all the way down to brand new pair of tightly buckled black Saba-leather combat boots with stiletto heels that hugged her calves perfectly. How those chicks managed to run in high heels was beyond me, but that was one of the things that separated the real women from the *crossovers*, they knew how to walk and run in high heels without looking like they had Pandorian Sand Bugs up their butts.

As she ran past me, even taller than I had

imagined, I feel the skin on my arms tingle and the hair on the back of my neck rise. The Old Alphas are like that; they seemed to change the ions in the air around them, it feels as though lightening will strike beside them if they stood in one spot for too long. This one was fully charged. I could make out the thin aurora of the focus shield surrounding her like giant soap bubble. Having a little chuckle to myself, I then hummed another line from that corny song, "She always wants to play, she never never says no".

She stood there for a moment with her back to me, waiting, I supposed, for her tracker to catch up, not seeming to attract a whole lot of attention besides Mr. Sombrero's and my own. Being so early in the day on this semi-nightless planet, most of the other settlers are still sleeping and the re-sellers haven't started up yet; it's hard to image a time of the day when they ever shut up. Somehow they managed to keep a normal day cycle, though I still can't figure out how anyone knows what time of day or night it is around here. Nothing here on Calypso is ever what you would call *normal*.

I can't take my eyes off this Salamander Queen for a second; her breathing is slightly labored, but steadies, though she has just come in from The Wastes and could have been running full-tilt, non-stop for hours to get here. She stands perfectly erect, long shapely legs like roots planted to the ground beneath her, she disengages then holsters her sidearm, pulling off her gloves and holding them tightly under one arm. You learn not to put anything down in this town or you loose it fast. She then begins to work at the helmet locks under her chin.

I slowly work my eyes down the smooth curve of her long back down to her hip belt. The belt itself is of little interest to me, it also looks new and of the same black dyed Sabakuma leather as her boots, very high quality. I'm no thief though, I am more curious about the way it hangs there, low over her wide hips and firm athletic looking ass. What an beautiful ass too; I have only ever seen anything like that once before, on the legs of a Masi Princess from long ago that I once saw pictured in one of the old Earth files. That one was as black as the

dessert night on Earth, where the Masi once made their home, but this one, from what I could see above her thigh guards, was as white and as firm as the hide on an Armax bull.

You don't go out to The Wastes alone without a tracker. Not even if you were an O.A. Her *dog* must be regular people, not high-end genetic meat like she is. Whoever it was probably ran out steam miles back and has likely been eating her dust trying to catch up, or this doll fed it to a Goki when she ran out of decoys. Hunters were always feeding noobs to the mob, cheaper than store bought decoys and almost as stupid. If only you could get them to stop running around in circles when they are being chased. I hear the *Ubers* will let a noob run a little distance ahead when a mob they are hunting is chasing them, then put a single shot into the noobs ankle. This keeps them from running any further and makes them scream even louder. "Better a dead noob than damaged armor" they say, this shit is expensive to repair, but noobs are free, or so I'm told.

You don't feed a good tracker to a mutant unless you're really in trouble, or the mob has something you really want. Could be the tracker tried to rob her out there. In which case, it's every man for himself, or herself as the case may be. Of course with those legs, Salamander here could have just outrun her tracker a long time ago. Time is money out here as anywhere and if her tracker couldn't keep up then it didn't deserve to get paid, let alone live. She didn't seem to be in any hurry now though. Almost too relaxed.

Having unlocked the tight straps that held the helmet in place she bent right down at the hip to fix a crease in one of her long, black boots. Holy Lootius, it didn't take a regenetherapy expert to tell that this girl was a real woman and from closer observation a natural blonde too.

Feeling a little more clearheaded now and wanting to meet her I called out, "Hey there!" I said, not very loud, but loud enough I thought, for her to hear me addressing her. Forgetting how proud some of these older ubers can be, I cleared my throat and gave another holler, "Oi!" I barked, a bit louder

“OA, have any luck out there?”

At that, the whole camp went immediately still and silent, as though they all had been lying there waiting for someone to draw attention to the obvious presence of someone who clearly didn't belong. The wind died down, all the distant sounds of creatures in the wilderness around the camp went quiet. The silence was really eerie, even the dozen or so sleepers scattered about in the near safety on this side of the turret gun tower stopped snoring. Even that damn hovering ad display to the south went quiet and that thing never stops. Now that was strange.

Confused, I moved my eyes away from those perfect pear shaped hips to the screen south of the Fury entrance gate. The image, which I normally avoid looking at like the Toxic Zone Plague, was frozen in place. Some talking head, hawkng hemorrhoid cream for all I knew, had stopped in mid-sentence, staring out blankly at his uninterested mostly sleeping audience. It had the spooky effect of portrait painting, like that *Mona Lisa* thing that Neverdie bought for his museum of useless shit on CND. Its eyes seem to follow you around the room wherever you go.

That fool Never Die will buy any weird shit like that. I keep hoping I'll stumble over a Lysterium stone with image of Lootius on it. I'll make fortune selling it to Neverdie for his museum and maybe get out of this lousy place. I should be mining precious metal under contract for a weapons developer, instead of picking up ugly rocks or digging for ore with these creeps and grifters.

That stupid sign must be bugged, everything out here was. It just keeps staring out at me. Strange, this eerie stillness has fallen over the whole area like a covering dome. Maybe this bunch of bored drifters just wants to be entertained, “Hey you!” I called a little louder now that I knew I had an audience, “You, O.A!” still nothing. “Hey are you people really old, or is it just a really old society?”

Chuckling, I looked around for a response from the peanut gallery. All I got was few uncomfortable coughs and the sound of someone behind me teleporting out, then

another, then another. In fact everyone in the immediate area was clearing a perimeter around me in a hurry. Was it something I said? Off in the distance I heard *rat-ta-tat* of a pulse weapon. Then the dying chirp of a young gokibursagi, just beyond the line of the near tree line, a bit too close for comfort; those little bastards could snip your legs off below the knees in a single bite. What the hell was going on here?

This Amazonian eye candy didn't even seem to notice me. I knew she could hear me. Those pure bloods were genetically perfect in every way; I bet she had the hearing of a high level SEG. Still turned away, with that beautiful backside to me, she straightened to her full height again and reached up slowly to remove her headgear. Popping the vacuum seal clips with a hiss it released its grip on her scalp. She bent slightly forward and eased the Salamander Helmet off her head, back to front, so as not to mess her face job and at the same time let her hair out in that sexy, un-mussed way, again, as only a real women would know how to do.

She was a blonde all right, but not what I had expected. Her hair was cropped short and business like and very, very sexy, platinum blonde too, not natural blonde at all. This woman paid extra to have the colour of her garden match the colour of the hair on her head. I don't even know what that says about a girl, besides having money to burn in a beauty salon, but whatever it was, at that moment I would have give my last PED to find out.

Now I could see the full-length of her long shapely neck. The tips of the short hairs on the back of her scalp were wet with perspiration despite the air-cooling properties of the helmet and the skin on her neck was beaded with moister. My nostrils flared and I caught the scent of her skin over the distance, sweet farrum nut oil and sea salt and something that reminded me of a tropical rain, real tropical rain, like the rain I hadn't seen here on Calypso in months.

I breathed deeply to get the full pleasure of her fragrance, but began to smell something else too, just there on the outside edge of my olfactory perception, something familiar

that I couldn't quite put my finger on. I cocked my head slightly and took another long drag of air into my nostrils. This time even more flavors filled the air between us, definitely the aromatic notes of farrum nut and the smell of the surf off Argus Beach or maybe the beach near Cape Corinth, some floral scent too, maybe the shampoo she used, no doubt on both patches of platinum blonde hair. Remembering the vision I had seen a moment earlier, I also caught the scent of new leather and the slightly smoky metallic scent of ammunition recently fired. I could smell the perspiration on her neck and the slight tang of perfume from between her thighs and I could smell blood, though not her blood, not human blood at all. Another long, deep whiff and it all started coming together.

I knew what that smell of blood was, at that very moment I began to realize, albeit too late, that something very wrong was going on here, I was being set up. With her helmet off she turned just her head to look at me over her shoulder. Her eyes were bright green, like pure naranisum. I've never seen eye colour that green before. She looked deeply into my face, then briefly down at the obvious activity in my trousers. Then with a broad, sensual smile on her wide luxurious mouth she looked up again, but not into my eyes, she looked past me, just over my left shoulder. Then she turned her head to face forward again.

The scent of blood wasn't coming from her or even from her direction. It was the smell of Trox blood and only one person I knew of smelled like that. I didn't need another whiff to know who had crept up behind me like a cat when I was distracted. I glanced over to where I knew in vane my weapon lay tucked under my kit bag and since she now knew that I was fully aware of her presence behind me she made no hesitation in pressing the barrel of her BLP to my skull just behind my ear and activated the *arm-weapon-mech* on it's hand grip. Instantly the thing began to hum, I could feel it vibrating against the skin at the back of my head, with a high pitched wizzzz the laser sight reflected off my melon like a halo, marking a warm red dot where a plasma pulse could punch out a hole big enough, well, big enough to put another whole human head if

she squeezed the trigger.

"Hello Tia." I said with disgust, "you leave anything alive out there?" Still trying to be the clown, but knowing I must be in deep shit to draw so much attention. At this the crowd, most of whom lay sleeping a moment ago, completely dispersed. Everyone ran for cover leaving the three of us standing by the teleportal pad alone. She pressed the weapon down a little firmer into my scalp.

"Eat d'd'd' dirt shub," she hissed in her stuttering, lispy accent. That was all the instruction I needed to instantly drop to my hands and knees, then lay out flat on the ground, arms and legs splayed wide and face down. The quick movement started the hammering in my head from my hangover to begin pounding again, with a pain so intense I almost wished that Tia had pulled her trigger.

The beam of her laser sight not leaving the back of my head for a second she raised a heavy boot and slammed it down hard on my lower back, crunching my boner into the hard ground under me. Damn that hurt like hell, "very subtle Tia", I said. Painful, but subtle, I thought, "Nice to see someone still has a sense of humor this early in morning." I said groaning with the pain in both heads now.

Tia is a professional tracker and a trox hunter, a serious trox hunter. Some said she never slept. Hadn't slept for years they said, hunted non-stop for days at a time. She had a hot looking little bod beneath that Nemesis armor, tiny little thing really, but her face was so scared up after battling so many mutant monsters. If you got too close, their blood spatter burned the skin and left nasty scare tissue behind. No one would say that she was an attractive woman anymore, if she ever had been and that awful smell of Trox blood followed her wherever she went. Nobody else smelled like that, nobody human anyway.

I had been set-up all right and I had fallen headfirst right into their trap. Everything began to piece itself together in my mind, the man in the sombrero, the strange and beautiful visitor, maybe even the booze I had consumed the night before, all to leave

me momentarily defenseless. Splayed out flat in the dirt I was completely helpless, all I could do was lay there, face to ground, breathing in the odor of dust covered bone fragments. The dead from the Robot Wars lay three meters deep around this whole area. Generations of dead lay under foot around Fort Fury for miles, a few of their gruesome forms were clearly outlined where the wind had blown the dust away from their fossilized skeletons. I wasn't all that eager to join them, not today anyway.

Though Tia was just a tiny little turp of woman, her aim and her weapon skill would certainly disable me, permanently if I tried anything. Tia had been hired for this job, kind of an honor actually, knowing that I must be enough of a threat for someone not to take any chances, pointless really considering my mental state and how unprepared I am. Their timing and execution though were flawless.

Bounty hunters, I thought, I am a dead man, or worse. I am going to get dragged back, back to Hades, back to that nightmare I had left behind me a year ago.

"What's her name?" I asked in agony, directing my question to the ugly, Trox smelling thing still grinding my pecker into the thousand years old bone fragments, my face pressed firmly to the ground.

"Sssshe?" Came the broken, guttural answer, "Sssshe is Ayla" she said and slammed down her foot hard on my ass for emphasis, causing another wave of excruciating pain to radiate from my groin, "...and you" she reminded me "you are fucked!" At that she spat right at the side of my face, but missed. The gob went wide. Chicks can spit, but they can't hit a damn thing when they do.

I only had a few seconds left to get one more jab in before I was rendered unconscious. Ayla was loading for a nerve blast. I could hear her murmuring the incantations to activate the implant she carried in her cranium just below the frontal lobes and the rush of air as she waved her hands and arms to make the signs required to direct the nerve blast at my head. Turning my head slightly to look up at Tia under my

outstretch arm I said, "Not by you I hope."

Then came a blinding light and the force of the blast hit my skull like a load of bricks.

Then came darkness.