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saltare cūm diablo

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Other than Cue Ball and Second Hand, the Steel Annex has only one base to speak of and that's on Sapphire itself. Originally conceived as a home port for recreation and reboot than a base of operations, the designers still felt it necessary to add on a dozen turret defense towers, a handful of missile farms, and a hanger deck below the air field with thirty-two fighters and eight Razorback gun-ships for, as they so eloquently put it—shits and giggles. Though bristling with armament galore, stowed underground out of sight and out of mind, this facility is mostly protected by diplomatic immunity as well as the political neutrality of Sapphire itself.

It also helps that ninety-five percent of the people on site, at any given moment, are civilian employees and tourists on holiday.

The centerpieces of the base are as iconic as those were for the 1939 World's Fair. First to go up was the kilometer wide glass biosphere constructed over seventy years ago at a time when Sapphire did not have breathable air to speak of. Anchored on three sides to solid rock, and suspended over a small fjord at the end of a ragged peninsula called the Church Key, the sphere stands as an engineering marvel to this day. Except for its wide-open spaciousness, posh appointments and the hundred and fifty meter wide pool at the very bottom, transparent and overlooking the waves crashing on the rocks below, this is actually considered an utterly practical and self-contained environment.

The two-kilometer tower next to it, referred to as *The Spike* or sometimes the GOP, for God's Own Punji, was constructed forty years afterwards with the old Trylon in mind, and at a time when there was finally breathable air and blue skies to boot.

The Administration for the Annex was moved over to the Spike upon its completion, but they only took the top six floors high in the sky. The rest of the tower, as planned, ended up as apartments, and as offices serving private firms, companies, and consulates as well. Another nifty addition to the lower three floors was the financial PX (the Pleiades Exchange) making this facility the de facto World Trade Center to the Frontier states.

The sphere, on its third and last renovation, was converted to a full-blown resort hotel that, not only served the troopers and their families of the Annex, but was opened to the public as well. Because this massive structure is surprisingly luxurious and the rooms huge, and because the service and food is of extraordinary quality, and yet the cost of everything on the Church Key is bargain basement cheap, the Kilosphere, as it is now known, has been christened the nouveau Motel-6 of Five-Star resorts.

The Kilosphere has become such an exceedingly popular destination that they had to expand the operation by constructing two noticeably smaller, but equally impressive, spheres to handle the overload and, when that wasn't enough, they recently finalized construction of a hotel and convention complex which was inspired by the Giza Necropolis in Egypt. Eight pyramids by count, three of them massive as hell, all twice the dimensions of the original, are still dwarfed by the spheres, but they are impressive in their own right.

Now, having a small military airfield adjacent to a large civilian airport has had its problems over the years but today has been an exceptionally bad day for the civilian air traffic controllers.

Because the HWG drop ships are carrying children unsecured in the ships holds they have had to take great care in transporting them. Forced to use the narrow civilian corridors coming into Scab the competition for approach slots has proven frustrating for everybody but, at least, the controllers are letting the drop ships come in groups of twelve or more when they manage to squeeze them in.

Over twenty-some thousand people, vacationers and civilian employees alike, have made their way to the edge of the airfield by the Giza complex to watch the drop ships roll up, off-load the children, and launch vertically up and out of the controlled airspace. The crowd is abuzz with news about that day's events, and they cheer and applaud the troopers of the Annex as they escort the children into the main entrance of the three-hundred meter tall Khafre pyramid.

Slated to open last New Year's Eve, people were wondering why the grand opening of this place kept getting pushed back but now they know. The three pyramids are spacious enough to house the children while they are out processed to waiting families.

Many of the clones looked exactly alike, carbon copies to be exact, but one child stood out from the rest. Not because of anything more than she was singled out at the entrance to the Khafre pyramid and whisked away under guard to God knows where.

The door man noticed this, as so did the bell hops, but when the doorman went to ask the Sergeant escorting two teenagers girls, who appeared to be cut from the same cloth as, to their count forty-nine of the littler ones, he was summarily told not to ask before he could get the question out.

The urban legend about "Fifty-Two" will be unsubstantiated for quite some time but these guys will believe it, as will all their friends and family even though they counted only fifty-one.

A Warthog and a Thunderbolt fighter both slip in under the radar and set down on the airfield at a spot closest to The Spike, and beside another gun ship that itself landed only a half-hour before.

Sitting on the grass, Monique and the family stand to greet Maria, Bob, Nicole, and Nikki as they exit the ship in gray and black utility BDUs. Pete, on the other hand, walks past them with a nod and makes a beeline to Jacob as he conducts a walk-around visual inspection of his fighter.

Noticing the scoring marks on the gun cowling, and already knowing what happened with his crew, Peter asks, "Fur ball, anyone?"

"Not quite. More of a run and gun, but your Lieutenant Peña surprised me. That kid had a couple slick moves. Clearly improvised."

"The...nubie?"

"Look, when the dust settled that nugget was the only one left from the Sunliners and Smoke still flying, *and* he got on the scoreboard." Jacob pats Peter on the shoulder, "Let me put it to you this way, my Number Four, who he shot down, she wants to skin his ass alive and tac it to her wall."

"So, did you try to recruit him?"

Jacob grins as they start to follow the others who are making their way towards the spike, "Made my pitch, but we'll see when his commission is up."

"You people are shameless."

"Ya, well..." Jacob thinks for a second, "How about you?"

"If I get that desk job, then I'm shootin' to be a full-bird desk jockey. If not, then you just may hear from me."

Jacob laughs, "Peter, if you're ready to be a political animal, then I got just the thing for you."

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"I can't believe that you're actually showing me this!" Peter exclaims as he watches Nicole, huddle with the mass of little girls and the two teenagers.

Even with the Cliffs Notes version of the story Peter finds it miraculous that these children made it out alive. He also finds it miraculous that the S.A. is going to let them stay alive.

Nobody else would.

Realizing that this is a knowledge that he should not be privy too, nor responsible for keeping secret, he turns to Jacob, "You know I have to report this."

"We want you too but, then again, they already know, Pete."

"Okay then, what's the point?"

"A modest proposal, you might say."

Just then Nikki and Jessica walk in, with Maria speaking up as she enters right after them, "Lebedev has just agreed to be the U.N. liaison for Fifty-Two."

"Good." Jacob smiles, then to Nikki he gestures to Peter, "Nikki, I would like you to meet Major Ribot. Waddya think?"

Nikki looks at Peter for a few seconds, scans his mind and says with a nod, "He will do."

Pete asks, "For what?"

Jacob grins, "A job."

Nikki elaborates, "I have just chosen you to head the D.P.K.O. component that will work with Ambassador Lebedev. In this situation, normal protocol will be suspended, and you will be answering directly to the Security Council. Interested?"

Jacob adds, "You get to stay in the Corps!"

Peter shakes his head, "Who gets picked, well, that's a State Department choice."

"That is my choice, and Ambassador Mofid will see to it." Nikki steps up to him, "Major Ribot, it is all about containment. I am a prisoner on this planet and your job will be to see that it remains so. The people who watch over me must be people that cannot be swayed by me. The Annex will be my guards, you the Warden and Lebedev will be my advocate. Your job will be pretty easy because I, that is we, have already been spiked."

She glances at Jacob and Maria, "We have been dusted with triple redundancy nanoids. Net, GPS *and* dead man-switch, and they appear pretty foolproof I might add. I am stuck for good or bad."

Peter looks over at Jacob, "You're serious."

Jacob replies, "Containment is everything."

Nikki takes Peter by the hand, "I need someone I can trust, so you get the nod, Colonel."

Peter corrects her, "That's Major."

"Not for long." Nikki smiles as she turns and walks to join Nicole and her sisters.

Maria cuts this all short, "I gotta get you back to the flight line, Pete. The family is loading up now."

Peter looks at his father, "What do I tell them about you?"

"Tell them the truth. That'll put them on edge to be sure." Jacob then pats him on the back, "See you in a couple of weeks."

After a quick round of goodbyes, Maria escorts Peter out leaving Jacob and Jessica standing there watching the clones and Nicole touch, hug and rejoice in each other.

After a minute Jacob smirks, "Can't you just feel the love?"

Jessica counters, "Can't you just taste the bile?"

These two just look at each other and smile, and after a few seconds, they both laugh out loud. This is their first real moment as father and daughter, and for the first time they feel genuine affection towards each other. It will take baby steps but get there they will. Jacob will never be an authority figure, Jessica is so beyond needing that, light-years even, but he will be what she has never had before. Someone she can look up to.

Jessica adds, "You are aware that they see themselves as enlightened—in a very literal sense."

Jacob frowns, "You *are* working for me, right?"

She thinks about it and nods, "I guess I am."

"Keep `em in check. Will ya?"

Jessica holds out her hand, "Give me a pistol and a couple of mags, and problem solved."

"You would do that wouldn't you."

"Just lock the door on your way out."

Jacob smiles, "Love too...can't."

Jessica looks at the clones and sighs, "Little rays of Sunshine, or dark clouds on the near and far. Do you really want to take that chance, *Dad*? I say, if you're ever going to go back on your word then now *is* the time."

"I can't do that."

Jessica turns and looks into his eyes with ice, "I can."

Jacob ices back at her, "Okay, one day I may take you up on that offer...Scarab."

Jessica glows.

Jacob just gave her a handle, a call sign, and one so apropos when considering her job. This was a sign of acceptance that did not go unnoticed, but unexpected just the same.

It is just then that Nicole pulls away and steps back from the girls while saying, "Girls, I gotta go debrief. I won't be long so if you need anything just ask Jessie. She knows the ropes."

Nicole stops by Jessica and kisses her on top of the head, and as she starts for the door Jacob flags her down, "Just a second, I'll walk out with you."

He turns to Jessica while pointing to the JACC fighting suit he is still wearing, "I got to get out of this shit. I won't be long."

Jessica watches him step out, and as he reaches the door he turns around and mouths the words "play nice" to her.

For the life of her, Jessica can't believe that she is here and alone with them or, is it her? Or, is it...it? Jessica notices that twelve of them are smaller than the others. Cherubs—children stunted at around seven years of age for all the obvious reasons. Then there are another twelve she knows that will stop growing around eleven or so at the onset of puberty. Again, for all the obvious reasons. Then sixteen of them are Third-Gen's that have returned to popularity again with a vengeance. Female templated hermaphrodites with above average endowments have become all the rage.

What creeps Jessica out is that only twelve of them, the Beta's included, are the only *normal women* amongst them. That is if you can call her mother normal, which nobody ever has.

To put this freakishness out of her mind, Jessica looks out the window in time to watch the last of the drop ships launch up and out. The beauty of the view helps her tune out the cacophony radiating from the clones, but her serenity is quickly shattered by the mental equivalent of a knock at her door.

<"Jessica, if I may impose upon you.">

Unable to escape the intrusion, Jessica snarls while looking out the window, "It's Jessie, but it's Burke to you."

<"If we may share a moment?">

"I was content in ignoring you."

<"I will be quick.">

Jessica turns with wide eyes, "I can't hear you!"

Nikki opts to speak, "Words then?"

"If we must."

Nikki draws her breath, "I feel like I am perched precariously on top of a flagpole. Metaphorically speaking."

Jessica cuts her off, "Yea, and I'm playing tetherball on that flagpole and looking to knock your ass off. Realistically speaking."

"Must you be so adversarial?"

"Ah..." Jessica feigns introspection for a second, "Ya? ...Ya! It's my prerogative. Work with me here!"

"We could be working together."

"For what!" Jessica leans towards her, "Look, you're like the *Hello Dolfi* of the Future Fascist Explorers Club. All ya'll gotta do is get a little goose in your step to make it picture perfect!" Jessica touches her face in a fashion observation then, "Ya know, lederhosen would be a nice touch too!"

Nikki is clearly frustrated, "Can we at least be civil?"

"Okay, let's stop this right here. If you want to live then stick to your end of the bargain. Otherwise, I'm gonna get all up inside your borderline narcissistic, self-inflated ass."

"Reluctantly...or, you could join me?"

"Me? The collective me! No, trust *me*, I won't fit in."

"Please reconsider. Together we can make a difference. There would be no limit to our potential."

Jessica has had enough.

Nikki's eyes go wide with disbelief as her hand raises up and, against her will, she slaps herself across the face. The other fifty-one freeze in a shocked silence as they digest what just happened.

Jessica, with eyes cold as ice but her sarcasm still intact, leans to one side and calls out to the crowd, "Oh! I'm sorry, did ya'll miss that!"

On queue, and with horror, the other fifty-one haul off and slap themselves across the face in exactly the same manner as their de facto leader had.

Making people see, hear or feel things, and tricking them to do things is one thing, but what Jessica did was coercive manipulation. The clones realize that she now has the upper hand in absolute terms. Jessica has what's been called macro-psychokinesis and she's a natural one at that. Known in some circles as a *Puppet Master*, of the two previous 'psi-clone' anomalies created by accident at the cloning facilities one they were able to make disappear without much notice.

As for the other the Co-op had to nuke the facility.

As they quietly blow a mental gasket over this, Jessica bites the air on just this side of rage, "Okay, Helios, Ra, Surya, or whatever the fuck you secretly sport yourselves to be. You will stand down!" Jessica jabs a finger at her, "And, to clarify, that means back the fuck off!" Jessica then quietly adds, "You will learn your place, or I will crush your ugly little skulls."

It was then that Jacob speaks up, "That's a neat trick, Jessie. What else can you do?"

Jessica looks over her shoulder only to see her father leaning against the wall in dress BDUs. He must have been watching the whole thing, and this is a card she did not want him to see played so she acts quickly to fix the situation.

With a simple thought, she drops her father. Jacob's eyes roll back into his head and he crumples to his knees. Nikki watches with curiosity as Jessica takes his hands and guides him towards her on the bench. She then gently pulls his head to rest on her lap.

Without looking up, Jessica quietly says, "Get lost."

Humbled and humiliated, Nikki slinks away with her tail between her legs only to hear Jessica call out, "Hey, Nikki!"

She stops and looks back at Jessica who mocks her with a tidbit of advice, "Try speaking in contractions." Then with a severe country drawl Jessica adds, "It will make you-all seem more human."

With that done, Jessica starts off by ransacking her father's short-term memory, looking for something to bury what he just witnessed, and *voilà!* She finds the perfect memory. With this she can create a dream for him that will not only make a mess of his waking thoughts, but one he will find some amusement in recollection.

She kisses her fingertips and touches them to his temple, and with that, his eyes close as he slips into a deep sleep.

As Jessica softly strokes his head she gives him a genuine smile, "*Saltare cùm Diablo, patris*. Pleasant dreams."

Jessica's lips part as she opens a pathway into her father's mind, and if the eyes were the window into the soul then hers would be portholes into a netherworld for the end of times. A mercy free realm—loathsome and complete—full of flame and pandemonium, and uncompromising torments.

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It's your typical picture of Hell...

As if *Necronomicon* itself came to life, bio-mechanical textures are interspaced with towering jagged rocks, bursts of fire, and the occasional grasping appendage—with the cursory gnashing of teeth, and shrieking, after said grasping. The stench of sulfur and rot, and the screams of the damned fill the air. It is a heartless place where invincible error is moot, appeals are for naught, and where savagery is rewarded yet gratifying in its own right.

And, as horrific as this microcosm appears at first glance, on closer examination it is evident that the damned here have become desensitized to it all. It's like Hell has taken on the characteristics of a Del Taco commercial with the *same-place same-thing* mindset. It's not the mayhem, pain, agony, and daily dismemberment that torments these people, you get over those pretty quick, it's the humiliation this world offers that's unendurable.

Eventually you overcome that too.

The one minor annoyance that nobody here ever finds relief from is the maddening drone of Ravel's *Boléro*, Toscanini style, which permeates every nook and cranny of this place. Reorchestrated into Hell's own elevator music, it is accompanied by legions of musicians condemned to play the banjo, or the accordion, repeating sixteen bars of mind numbing Muzak for the duration of their stay.

Hell has a galaxy of workstations, serving many a different criminal-transgression and tortfeasor alike, but it is the VIP wing that has developed a fan-base of sorts.

The daily standards like Hitler getting gang-raped by huge circumcised golems, or Stalin yet again being staked out and eaten by hordes of army-ant regimented Ukrainians, mandibles and all, still get the occasional curious onlooker, but it is the obscure sinner that draws the crowds anymore.

One demon pulls three young men out of the middle of the VIP queue, tosses them into a barbeque pit, and starts to drown them

in lighter fluid. As if spectators at a PGA tour the hordes of the damned, currently on break, stop to watch the show. Rarely do they ever know why someone is punished so brutally but when the demon lights the match and bellows at the *hot-dogs* on the grill, many of those in the crowd nod their heads with understanding and approval.

"Not even DOOM music, mutherfuckers!" And to the cheers of the damned he tosses the match in after them.

Back at the queue another demon chastises a group at the front of the line, "Look, this here is a union shop and we got a serious back log! The twentieth century set us back big time! Right now we're getting the short timers and priority jobs out of the way so we can give you Jihad fucks the service you deserve."

And so it goes...

In the adjoining lake it is as if the damned look like they are in the middle of a beach swim party. As uncomfortable as it looks they all manage to laugh, splash and play in the rolling waves of watery superheated plasma.

This is where newcomers come first. High in the cliffs the demons toss them in one by one. Aiming for the stalagmites jutting out of the plasma below they get the occasional solid skewer, but most of them cartwheel into the plasma with a *swoosh*. This is followed by the *snap-crackle-pop* of steam emanating from the entry point as the moisture from their body is instantly cooked out, and the plasma starts to leach in to take its place.

This is the point of initiation. This is where the body parts are tossed into—where they mend and repair. This is a holding pin where the damned find some respite until they are pulled out for their scheduled session of buggery and vivisection, standard fare around here, or selected randomly out of the mix for something special.

And, today is a special day with a very special visitor.

Across the lake is Jacob, not as a human but as a ten-meter tall demon. Sitting, anchored to the rocks at the end of a two-lane bowling alley, his face appears somewhat normal but the rest of his body has morphed into a serpent like monster that arches high over the end of the lanes like a cobra.

An unusually large head slams into ten bodies at the end of a lane. The bodies tumble into each other just like pins do, but instead of the resonate and woody crash you normally get, here you get a hollow crunch of bones and the dull thuds from blunt trauma.

All of them went down, and with a hoot and a hollar from Lucifer, Archangel Michael walks back from the line with a wide grin.

"That's the touch, Mikey!" Lucifer pats Michael on the back. "See what happens when you hit the mark? Blammo! All fall down!"

Michael shrugs, "I think I'm gettin' the hang of it?"

Lucifer urges, "Remember your follow thru. Very important!"

Michael turns to Lucifer, "You know, Gabe and I have been wondering when you'll come and pay us a visit on high?"

"I still make people nervous up there, and you know that."

"We'll take you to the driving range. That's out of the way and we can teach you a thing or two."

"Naw, you feather dusters can keep your croquet."

Michael shakes his head and blurts out, "Golf!"

"Yea, whatever..." Lucifer tosses Michael a can of Raptor Red Ale, and smiles, "At least my balls come back to me!"

Multitasking, Jacob has already cleared the lane with a scythe like dew claw on his foot. After scraping the body parts into the lake, he drops the rack on that lane—setting ten more whole victims in place, and then starts to load the pin setting rack with a purpose.

With Jacob's arm reaching into the lake for another handful of in-volunteers, Lucifer applauds, "Well, if it ain't little Maria Ramirez."

Standing as the head pin, Maria waves and pipes up in her best East L.A. chola accent, "Lucie, I'm home!"

Lucifer laughs, "Glad you made it! I've been wanting to thank you for our addition to the damnation squad. The boy 'as got talent."

"Oh, thanks Luce!"

Lucifer gestures to Jacob, "Hey, let's have some fun! Jacob, I can use Maria in the next frame so send her on up for me!"

Jacob lifts Maria out of position, "What are you doin' here?"

Maria shrugs, "Penance. Three-hundred years."

Jacob smiles at her, "Oh ya, I remember now!"

Maria points to Jacob's body, "You...always like this?"

"No. Only when I'm on the clock like now."

"Well, when you're off, why don't you come take a dip with me in the lake? Catch up on old times, ya know."

"Sounds good!" Jacob leans in and whispers with a little nervous apprehension, "Do you mind? I'm kinda busy right now."

"Oh no-no-no, back to work! Don't let me hold you up!"

"Thanks, hon."

Maria winks at him, "You know, it's been quite a while since we've rock-n-rolled."

Jacob smiles back, "Three hundred years—cakewalk!"

Jacob casually snips Maria's head off with his teeth and swallows it whole, and after a few seconds of loud intestinal gurgling her head reappears with a flatulent explosion. Now rocketing down the ball return trough it rolls along and tumbles up the ramp and into the return rack with a twirling bounce.

Bumping into the head of Rosie Alvarez, one of the people she defended *in absentia*, when Maria's head stops spinning she blinks her eyes with surprise then says, "That was different!"

Rosie looks over at Maria, "*Ey, mieja*, new in town?"

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