

No Shelter

Written by Travis Olson

With the cargo-hopper leveling to its peak altitude, the pull of gravity finally allowed Phester the leverage to pull Gillian inside the open back hatch. Gillian had relieved eyes before he came to terms with who's hand was gripping his sleeve hook, then it returned to contempt. Phester kept her hand on the hydraulic hinge until Gillian was a few more steps inside the cargo hold.

Phester looked out the hatch at the cities' silhouette as the sun was setting, often times she was never outside for weeks, let alone at this height with this vantage. The muting that natural colors gave to the world had a beauty that she struggled with appreciating but knew it was there. Levity was sinking in as she realized the mission was over. That's when she heard the Jamaican's voice.

"No! You'll find no shelter here."

Phester didn't get to turn as she felt the impact of the foot across her lower back. Gertrude flashed that the blind probability was a stepping push kick at 88%, Natural 95%, Male 75%; it was enough to send Phester out the open hatch since her fingers had relaxed their grip. Gertrude's mind wandered sporadically as she began assessing the situation.

*Coordinates, Ecuador, Chakana District, heading East-
Initial Descent Marker 829.8 meters; Freefall estimation 11 seconds; Recommend extending body form for variance; Recommend discarding unnecessaries-
Current Temperature 91° /33°; Street level disabled, will prompt upon destination;
Troubleshoot options available-*

Quote of the moment: "The certainty of death and the uncertainty of the hour of death is a source of grief throughout our life" E. Morin, -change quote?-

Within the First second, Phester extended her arms and legs as she scanned her plummet path while optioning Gertrude's troubleshoot options.

78% Success Probability- Option 1: Catcher Drone's have already captured trajectory and are in pursuit, Allow?

*43% Success Probability- Option 2: Dormant Hopper Webs are available for accessing?
Opposing Probability- Option 3: ...So it goes...-*

Phester opted for the turning on the Hopper Webs. It was the lesser option but the option she could control. Gertrude introduced her remote link up with the Hopper Web via the 3rd District Department of Safety database; unguarded and artificial, power up was imminent.

Rewriting Hopper callsign to current occupant proportions.-

Phester's peripheral acknowledged the arrival of the Catcher Drone as it sunk below her body, it's rounded shield appearance offered a place to rest upon.

Catcher Drone asks for compliance? Grant Permission-

Phester could see the ground expanding faster as the Drone began rise up and nudge under her stomach, the handles extended with volunteer push button activation; soon the handles would change to cuffs to secure an unconscious patron.

Warning! Catcher Drone deactivated!

Evade! Evade! Evade!-

Phester gripped the handle and somersaulted with the release; a burst of orange light accompanied her completion. The crackle of air as it energized from the streetlamp conductors and spiraled out the tentacled energy web. As it took her momentum, it also took her air and the

pressure in her chest seemed to want to exhale her stomach. As the web dissipated, it left an echo of its path for all to witness. For Phester, it was a spotlight for an enemy to follow.

Panic wanted to activate but she needed air first, the energy web ate all the local oxygen and would take some seconds to return.

Terminal Velocity has been successfully avoided.

Dormant Hopper Web's probability has been updated and archived.

Asphyxiation is being flagged by internal sensors. Please comply before secondary measures are activated.-

Phester's lips extended as wide and outward as they could searching but only tasting burnt carbon.

Compliance failed. Activating emergency pack.-

Phester felt her ribs rise and instead of her mouth suctioning, it exhaled against her will. She forgave the chaotic sensation as her other senses began to return. The crackling of fire and beeping alarms began to overtake the pulsing from her ears. Her fingers found purchase upon the street and pushed her to a seated position as she looked to her surroundings.

She was seated in the center of the street, there were bodies along the sidewalk probably concussed from the activation. The Energy Webs were designed to catch Hoppers that used to fly overhead; a concussion was preferable to a Hopper on your head. Phester's inner riggings gave her an advantage as she saw some pedestrians struggling to roll over, air must not have returned.

She could tell the street was a thoroughfare for vendors staging to head toward the outskirts of the plaza. It was lucky her attempted murder happened at the end of the day. The street was mirrored with old faux Redbrique buildings that were crumbling more than standing, the Catcher Drone had impacted into one and was burning what remained to combust.

On it, boss...

Rudimentary examination has failed to pick up casualties.

Tagged the local network to capture street intel, will revisit.-

Phester felt secure enough to stand. She looked to the sky, then back to the smoldering crash site. She was hired by Gillian's men, she was the only Runner on the mission.

Yah...

Accessing now. Coordinates acquired.

Recommend haste exit. Street intel has piqued, local miscreants being informed.

Quote of the moment: "Few men of action have been able to make a graceful exit at the appropriate time." M. Muggerridge, -change quote?-

Phester watched the crash site as she backed away from her landing spot, finally turning and walking toward the industrial Beanstalk in the distance.

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Escaping Eastside went without incident. Phester activated her blurry face for the cams and advertising sensors. She was able to shadow Gertrude's signature to a Bioroid courier she followed nearly to the Plaza Del Cielo. It was risky being this close to the NAPD headquarters as she was just part of the crew that escaped a corporate whistleblower not two hours earlier.

She palmed the cred stick wondering if there was any honor from the people that kicked her out of a moving hopper half a mile in the air. She believed there was but needed a safe place to access it. Chakana district was too chaotic a place for a controlled transaction.

Gabriel is in Rutherford.-

Gertrude offered. Phester didn't like Rutherford but she knew Gertrude liked Gabriel.

"Set up an appointment. See if he can restock my e-kit..." Phester eyed the commands but noticed Gertrude's command went out before her suggestion. Phester stopped walking and looked to the giant monolith, still a mile away and the running lights made it feel like dusk would never falter to the night. Her silhouette grew along the sidewalk as a Taxi floated down behind her, Gertrude had chartered a faster way to Rutherford.

As Phester waited at the gleaming reflective door, she stared at her bedraggled appearance. Her wig and clothes had been singed from the energy web, leaving behind faded grey markings that weaved opposite of their threads. She noticed her posture was leaning toward her augments, she noted her balance may need adjusting. She leaned forward to look into her eyes and saw the crimson glow flash back at her, she found it still aroused her and forgave the faults she'd been flouting.

The door opened and Gabriel's golden furred arms were already outstretched. "Phester!" He pulled her into a friendly embrace, she'd known not to fight this overtly aggressive salutation as it wasn't a threat and Gertrude would be embarrassed. Gabriel leaned back and leveled his head with hers, staring deeply into her eyes with his oversized felines, he gave Gertrude a wink. "How you doing, Gertrude?"

Phester's eye flashed out Gertrude's hello. Gabriel waited a beat before stepping aside, Phester appreciated Gabriel's respect for her running system. It was rare for a G-mod to have such an affinity for software. "Please come in."

Phester entered and felt overstimulated as Gabriel had redecorated since last she'd been. He had upgraded his link ups with shiny overlays, the walls had been tilted toward the ceiling to architecturally represent old port connects and the antique glass window that looked out over Broadcast Square had been replaced with antique touchscreens. "Are they functional?" Phester blurted out losing all composure.

"Oh, yeah? You haven't been since... Go ahead." Gabriel finished closing the door with a comradery smile.

Phester walked to the touchscreen and stared at the plastic scratches adorning the cover sleeve.

Be cool.-

Phester slowly raised her hand to the plastic. She chose her ring finger and swiped along the sleeve. A small text box blinked alive across the screen. The text questioned what could it do for the activator. Beaming, Phester looked to Gabriel, he smiled appreciatively back. "Play around with it, I'm going to grab your lung refill." Gabriel leaned against the angled wall and a door opened across from it, he gently pushed off and sauntered into the other room.

Retro makes you so Repr.-

"I'll repro you..." Phester bit back playfully. She looked beyond the touchscreen and saw Broadcast Square fully lit and clean, wonderstruck tourists gathering in awe and neglectful locals scathingly avoiding chance capture moments, she could see the sky above with twinkling satellites.

We'll be home soon enough.-

Gertrude could tell Phester's mood was changing, the longer she was unplugged the more difficult the world was for her. The swooshing of Gabriel's saunter announced his arrival.

"So, Gertrude tells me you need a safe connect?" Gabriel held an opalescent injection box.

“Yeah. Might be a safe transaction, might be Uh-Oh.” Phester turned away from the world. Gabriel handed her the box.

“What’s the device?”

“Cred stick.” Phester lifted her shirt, Gabriel’s eyes followed for a chance glance at the incision scars but then looked away remembering he is respectable. Phester fingered a skin flap and ejected the spent container.

“Easy enough...” Blinking his eyes away from Phester, he turned and reached up to touch a protruding sprinkler spigot from the ceiling. He pulled it down from a recoiling cord and bent back the spout to reveal a Cred stick port. He extended his hand. “...Cred please?”

Give him something, girl.-

Phester slowed her hand from inserting the new box and made eye contact with Gabriel, she gave the briefest of nods that it was okay to look. Gabriel glanced down but then looked away, a rare moment of insecurity from the curious cat. She clicked it in and lowered her shirt, then reaching into her jacket pocket, she produced the cred stick.

An awkward smile as he took the cred stick and held it from the port. “And what was the job?”

“I rescheduled a transport and opened security doors for a crew.” Phester didn’t hesitate to give Gabriel his payment.

“What are you expecting?” Gabriel’s eyes didn’t blink, watching her.

“I think they honored the deal and my payment will transfer without issue.”

“Thank you.” Gabriel inserted the cred stick and his gaze went behind her. The touchscreen lit up behind Phester and she turned to view the process. Gabriel had diverted the information to a holding company to assess the validity of payment. “You’re good.”

Phester didn’t see a release of funds. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah. Only thing funny is that there was an expiration date on collection...”

“...that explains them kicking me out of the Hopper.” Phester nodded internally to Gertrude.

“...I’m laundering the initial payment through a holding company. But I can give you full payment on a clean stick, if you’re in a hurry?” Gabriel’s eyes wandered about the touchscreen for any unforeseen variation but then felt confident when he looked to Phester.

“No. I can wait for the transfer from the hold. Thanks Gabriel.”

“Anything for my girls.” Gabriel smiled as he released the spigot and it recoiled to the ceiling, Phester felt her eye glow brighter. He crossed his arms and his face grew stern, protective. “Business aside?”

“Okay?” Phester acknowledged watching his mood.

“...Somebody threw you out of a hopper?”

“I know, I know.” Phester shrugged. “...But it’s squared since they paid.”

“You’re in a dangerous profession.”

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You know he was looking.-

“Yes. The two of you were not very sneaky with your intentions.” Phester knew this was coming.

Next time, I think you should let him insert.-

“Gertrude!”

It's just a recharge pack.-

"It's really kind of a personal thing."

You can trust Gabriel.-

"I know I can, he's my friend... But it sends a really mixed... a really warped message!"

If I run scenario checks for [Interruption Warning]-

"Bot, please!" Phester concluded the argument with a disconnect. Gertrude's learned empathy could sometimes need readjusting. Sometimes her program would extend the proximity of one and she would need to come back. Phester's same problem was that she would give Gertrude equal footing, which allowed for the wandering.

Perhaps another time.

Quote of the moment: "One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood." L. A. Seneca, -change quote?-

"Perhaps." The two had come to terms. The tunnel car alerted Gertrude to their upcoming destination.

We are arriving.

Update: No casualties from Eastside.

Update: Only minor injuries reported.

Update: Coordinate is flagged.-

Phester understood Gertrude's update. The two stayed on until they exited Nihongia district.

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Phester was tired. Ten flights of stairs had brought them to the penultimate floor of the old Mixer Union Hall building. A monument to the sturdy nature of the outdated N/M concrete that never required mixing. She lurched through the discarded doorway that took her to the hallway.

Gertrude was outlining the original wire schematic that showed where the probable connection point was. Phester looked to the walls as they were lined with cracks and in some places, energy weapon blast holes. "Any old NAPD reports?"

Archive perusal is unavailable at this time.

Echo scan: Audibility acquired.

Energy consumption observed.

Proceed with caution.-

The hallway ended with a closed door and an updated security lock. Phester was beginning to understand more about her quarry as she unlocked the door from the furthest proximity. "We walking into a pitfall?"

What you see is what you get.-

Phester looked the door over before she reached for the still operable doorknob and gave it a turn. The door opened and Gertrude prompted Phester with a tollbooth pop-up. "Pay it."

Confirm?-

Phester stepped in as the pop-up discarded. Like the front door, the room was old but the interior was upgraded with everyday tech. A window had been retrofitted as a lazy Susan drone delivery port which assembly lined into the auto-prep home vending machine servers that most heavily jacked-in runners utilize, Phester appreciated the efficiency of the set-up.

She walked to the window next to the lazy Susan and looked out. The Redbrique buildings no longer smoldered but the zany checkerboard outline of burnt ash could still be seen through the citizens walking along the street. "Send a ping."

Ping sent.

Prep Counters?-

There were more rooms but Phester felt this was the spot.

Ping returned.

Update: Callsign verified as "Nast"

Prep Counters? Please advise?-

"Ten flights up."

Copy.-

A whirring sound began from above and Phester now saw the hanging light panel was lowering, the size of it made sense as it was revealed to be the Runner's Bed. Though Phester could see him Gertrude preached to the choir.

Male; 5' 8" +/- 1" upon vert; weight within parameters of stress points;

Natural, no mod signatures visually present;

Tech preference is "hobby-modified";

Still wearing his headware, Nast sat up on the bed and looked Phester up and down. "You need a Runner?" He asked incredulously.

Update: Nast is not flagged or affiliated in corporate database;

"I'm looking for some local intel." Phester inquired.

Update: Nast is not flagged or affiliated in orgcrime database;-

Nodding in acceptance, he looked to his vending machines. "Beverage?"

Beverage menu and pricing Pop-up available for perusal.

Quote of the moment: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law." A. Crowley, - change quote?-

"No." Phester crossed her arms at ease in front of her.

"Okay. What's the inquiry?" Though her posture was relaxed and tolls collected, Nast seemed to still be reading the situation and turned his body to face her. He dangled his feet from the bed.

"I'm representing a third party into a prisoner escape that occurred yesterday." Phester began the lie to scan the room.

Alert: Room is sentient to information collection and verification.-

"There was a Cargo Hopper flight plan that had been rescheduled and traveled in this vicinity." Phester continued her own collection. "I have been made aware of a Catcher Drone activating... but then being deactivated from this location."

Update: Room is administrative; noncombatant.-

"Yes, I can confirm that." Nast was more comfortable as the question was asked.

"Cool..." Phester replied then distracted by Gertrude's prompt.

Conversational Intelligence pricing Pop-up available for perusal.-

"Oh, I see." Phester smiled to Nast to keep him at ease.

Confirm?-

A miniscule flash of light blinked from Nast's bed. "It was in my airspace, so my system knocked it down."

"Your airspace?" Phester looked to the efficient vending set-up. "For your deliveries?"

“Yeah. The drone traffic was interrupting my delivery windows, so I popped a deactivate order for any unscheduled drone that crosses my buildings airspace.” He smiled. “I had to lend some favors to some of the local couriers that were immediately effected but eventually the grid got marked as a no-fly zone... Is that all you needed?”

Update: Gertrude controls the room.-

“Hmm?” Phester pondered. “I think it is.”

Phester was to the bed within a second. She grabbed Nast’s legs and tugged hard. His body tumbled the length of the room to the window she originated from and was now back to. She grabbed under his armpits like lifting a child and viciously pushed him against the window in an effort to break it. His eyes darted about the room and finally to hers, his panic tears matched her remorseful ones as the glass finally splintered and his form dropped out of it.

Phester’s breathing labored as she turned away from the window not wanting to see the results. “Disconnect his delivery protocols.”

Protocols disconnected; Confirmed;

Street intel has been flagged; will update as required;

Would you like to listen to some bird noises?-

Gertrude knew Phester wanted something other than her pulse updates. “Yes, please.”

Copy.-

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Phester always took note that when they crossed 81st street to Ume Avenue, there was no litter save a wind strewn wrapper not yet collected. She walked to it and trapped it under her boot, kneeling she picked it up.

Proximity Alert: Clone; Female.-

“May I?” came a soft voice. Phester looked up and saw the pale skinned hand already outreached.

“Of course.” Phester knew better than to argue as she took in the welcome smile of the Clone. She handed the sealant wrapper over and the Clone courteously bow taking it and swiftly discarding it into a bag attached to her belt. Phester bowed her head after the Clone had turned away.

Update: You are five minutes from your destination.-

Phester could tell Gertrude wanted her to get home and plugged in. The stresses of the day needed to be worked off. However, the last five minutes along the border of the residential district was one of the most calming walks she could think of.

The servitude and diligence of the Jinteki Clones was a selling point and the residential district was their home and salesfloor. Like Rutherford, everything was shiny and clean but here it wasn’t a technological façade, here it was more natural. Many hands tended the arboreous surroundings. It was hands that made the deliveries and fixed the machinery. The air breathed cleaner and water was treated after recycling.

Phester’s shoulders arched back in an act of defiance of her fatigue. She took deep breathes and listened to the birds in her head. She noticed the litter growing more frequent as she turned off Ume Avenue, this was bittersweet as it meant she was almost home.

Marker 1 is in place.-

“Thank you.” Phester was pleased that the first security protocol was undisturbed. It was a step closer to ending her day. “Power up the station, please.”

Copy.

Overriding Marker 2 verification.-

Phester looked up at the row of aging apartment buildings. Built as a wall to block the cityscape from any latent Clone dreamers. She entered the back entrance and proceeded to the elevator. She placed her hand upon the sliding doors.

Opening now.-

The doors slide a part revealing the elevator slowly elevating, Phester took the plunging step into the shaft.

Mind your head.-

Phester knelt as the elevator doors closed and the elevator descended to its proper position inches from her bowed head.

Marker 2 is in place.

Opening now.-

The floor tilted down and Phester dove forward to the exposed opening now revealed. She enjoyed the headfirst slide, though it lasted mere seconds, it made her feel like jacking in for the first time. She arrived at the Eight-by-Five residence and crawled her legs inside so she could stand proper.

The majority of her far wall was her daily machinery tied into the apartment's utilities, she glanced at her vending situation and appreciated she'd built it but was envious of Nast's set-up. She began to drop her clothing upon the floor.

Station is ready.-

She kicked the clothing toward the entrance slide as she turned to the murphy-style energy bed attached to the wall. She pulled it down and was embraced by the liquid flickering neon blue light. She stretched a leg outward and then placed it on the bed, she then rolled into it and felt the gelatinous cushions ripple her until it settled on her natural posture.

Closing cover.-

The bottom of the bed detached and began rotating to the top of Phester, plunging her into darkness. "Jacking in."

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The castle had been built from an old video game. It had to be reimagined since the original was binary. Gertrude had chosen her opalescence form as she waited by the green flamed fireplace in the great room. Phester liquified into place at Gertrude's side. The two smiled and took each other's hand as the castle deleted revealing the boundless waves of the network for them to swim in.

-The End