

## The Moisture Farm

By Tim Macauley

“We may have gotten our first big break from Graciana,” Cedro said. He was multitasking as he spoke, his eyes twitching as he dragged various scripts about with his pupils. Ikinya perked up at the mere mention of her name. They’d had hopes after saving her at Carnival that she’d prove to be an intelligence windfall, but until now, she’d been mostly worthless. *Kind on the eyes, though.*

“Go on. About time she earned her keep.” Ikinya said. “Can you...not do that while we’re speaking? It’s driving me crazy. Feels like I’m speaking with an android on the fritz.” Cedro had particularly bad motor control of his limbs and countenance when he was surfing SIN.

“Sorry.” Cedro paused his live feed and looked Ikinya in the face. “You’re not gonna believe this. Seems she had a bit of a gambling problem. Or rather, an obsession with derivatives, credit default swaps— insurance trading and the like. You ever heard of TravelTrade?”

“Sure. A virtual market for buying and selling life insurance. Originally, it was quite innovative, creating a cheap means of buying life insurance for oneself. Rather than having customers pay a one lump fee annually, TravelTrade instead allowed customers to use a floating system...charging micro-transactions based on the insurer’s present circumstances. Go to a shady part of town, or if upcoming election results were unclear, your rate might go up .003 grams for the day, etc. It practically reinvented the insurance industry over night. It went ugly, in my opinion, when they started to allow third-parties to insure other people, often without them even knowing it. These virtual writs could then be traded to others, which gave rise to an entirely new market. The problem is—”

“The problem,” interrupted Cedro, “is that when anyone stands to make a dump truck of money on whether you live or die, at some point it begins to actually influence your odds of survival.”

“Exactomundo,” said Ikinya.

“Well apparently Graciana—recognizing Osvaldo’s hazardous lifestyle, decided there were some grams to be made there,” said Cedro. “She claims to have stashed a nano packet-pusher beneath the wash basin on his personal shuttle. It can’t sustain an open feed—Osvaldo’s security measures would certainly have detected it, but it manages to push buy and sell bids by hitching on packets every time his dropship flies past a telemetry tower.”

“You gotta be kidding. You’re saying she has a little virtual bot onboard that adjusts a life insurance policy on Osvaldo based on whichever region in New Eden that his dropship enters?”

“Precisely! She would hedge her bets when he entered a high-risk zone, like where Chosen were known to be attacking or where the Melding curtain had gained ground. And she would risk more when he entered more mundane regions...like the vacant wasteland of Smokestack canyon.”

“She sounds like quite a wiz with remote security ackles....tethering speculative bids with nav packets...”

Ikinya marveled. "We're gonna have to leverage her skills more in the future."

"Yeah, well get a load of this. She pinged me yesterday to let me know that her Osvaldo portfolio policy just went up 63%," Cedro said.

"What does that mean? That he's someplace safe, like here in Dredge?" Ikinya asked.

"On the contrary, she's been shorting him ever since their falling out." said Cedro, with laughter in his eyes. "It means she stands to make the most when he's in harm's way. It looks like our friend flew to coral forest yesterday. It appears he's in the western highlands there. We're aware that the Shishido crime syndicate has been establishing a base in the labyrinthine caves that the locals call *Sigu's Sanctuary*. At first, we naturally assumed he was flying out to check on his operations there, but interestingly..." He tapped his right temple and a digital diagram bounced from his neural-net over to Ikinya's viewport. "The last packet that was tethered to TravelTrade originated from a tower ten clicks north of there....in spitting range of some moisture reassembly farm. After that, nothing...nada....zilch...."

"The moisture farm....I remember that facility. I thought it was all but decommissioned. What use could that facility possibly be to Osvaldo?" Ikinya mused.

"I know, right? That was my first thought too. Maybe he hoped to take control of Copacabana's fresh water production and blackmail them somehow?" Cedro paused. "But then I got to thinking and I checked the central planning committee's civic projects databank and what did I find?"

Ikinya shook his head. "I haven't a clue."

"The moisture farm is one of six facilities critical to New Eden's terraforming project. Apparently it has a high-power radio frequency transmitter operating in the high frequency band that temporarily excites a limited area of the ionosphere. This—ionosphere agitator—creates localized atmospheric upcurrents that disrupt or "bend" the jet stream and influence regional weather patterns—in essence helping moisture ride west over the mountains and into the arid desert of Smokestack canyon."

"I'm vaguely familiar with it. At least the concept." Ikinya said. "So what good would an ionosphere agitator be to Osvaldo? He obviously isn't going through all this to send storm clouds above our heads."

"Well, that is indeed the million gram question, isn't it?" Cedro asked rhetorically.

"Regardless of his intent, we know it can't be good." Ikinya took a deep breath and let it out audibly. "When's the last time you've been to the beach? I reckon we ought to take a field trip."

"I reckoned you'd reckon so. " Cedro said, bemused. "I took the liberty of checking the feed grain freight schedule. Unfortunately...no dice. So instead, we're traveling...em, one class lower."

“I’m not gonna enjoy this, am I?”

“Neither of us will. Not one gram’s worth.” Cedro conceded, gritting his teeth at the unpleasantness ahead.

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The two men were lying prone between a pair of palm trees, the foliage providing a natural defilade from the hustle and bustle of activity below. Before them, the moisture farm sprawled across nearly two acres of land. It was covered mostly by scores of two meter-high cylindrical shafts which sucked moisture from the atmosphere, condensing it into liquid water. In the center of the facility was a small proper structure with a copper dome. A slit in the dome was parted and what appeared to be a large artillery cannon could be seen barely peeking out from the shadows within, its barrel aimed skyward.

“It’s like an old-fashioned telescope, when they used to build them on the surface.” Cedro observed.

“Yeah, can you imagine? It’d be like shaving in a mirror covered with steam.” Ikinya switched his optical augmentations to 100x scale. He could see coolant lines attached to the side of the cannon’s barrel—a telltale sign that it was in fact a laser of some sort. “That must be the ionosphere agitator.”

“Agreed. Jeez, look at all of them. It feels like half their syndicate turned up. It may be time for us to do another recruitment drive. Their ranks seem to be swelling. It’s a bit intimidating, I must say.”

Ikinya tried to survey the ruffians below but lost count every time. “They keep moving around, but I’m guessing at least 24. You?”

“Ya, I’d say in that range as well, give or take.”

And then they saw him. Their age-old nemesis, Osvaldo. A tall man, with a shock of white hair spilling over his shoulders and the upper part of his back. He had a wanly, sallow complexion, eyes deepset—nearly sunken—and an aquiline nose. He was clad in several layers of dusky-colored clothes and were it not for his gaunt face, it would be hard to guess his build. But that face—that boney face with its skin stretched taut like a percussionist’s tom-tom—it was suggestive of someone suffering from the wasting disease. Ikinya found himself wishing the disease wouldn’t dally.

Osvaldo appeared to be the only mercenary walking around the moisture farm without a battleframe on. Everyone else around him appeared to be heavily-armored. Shishido engineers had set up turrets all around the perimeter and several anti-air systems could be seen pointing toward the sky. Osvaldo himself walked with a rather wide gait, which was a bit curious. He was directing one of his lieutenants to lead four moisture farm technicians out of the agitator silo and into the clearing, where they were forced to kneel.

“Look at Osvaldo’s stride. I’m thinking he has jumpjets strapped on underneath his long duster. Still...it’s so bizarre that he’s the only one not sporting a battleframe today. It’s—“

“Cocky,” interrupted Cedro. “And clean. He doesn’t want to get his hands dirty.”

They could see Osvaldo pacing slowly around the prisoners. Ikinya moved the reticle in his neural-net sensorium over Osvaldo’s mouth and selected him. Osvaldo’s speech could be heard as clear as day.

“We didn’t ask for you FEDERALISTS to come and take our moisture away.” His voice dripped with scorn. “Why is it that governments always feel entitled to take away what meager things we’ve managed to collect, hmm? We don’t give two picograms about the conditions of Smokestack canyon. There’s a reason we didn’t move there, you see? And those who did have only themselves to blame.”

One of the technicians—their supervisor perhaps—spoke up. He managed to get half a sentence out, saying it was only a job and that they themselves were apolitical and—KERBLAM!

There was an extraordinarily loud explosion—what had to be the discharge of a repulsor rifle. Because Ikinya’s aural augmentations were boosting the scene, the noise was deafening—having hit the upper ceiling of its range and clipped into a staticky abrasive burst of fuzz. It felt like he’d been slashdotted, his sensorium overstimulated and he released the boost immediately.

“Oh God!” Ikinya exclaimed, at both the execution and the ear-splitting noise.

“I know. So much for not getting his hands dirty.” Cedro said. He pulled his X300 Gauss rifle up from his side and set the sights on Osvaldo. The crimelord was cradling an MKII barrel in both hands, steam escaping from various valves down its stock as he stood over the freshly-minted corpse at his feet. “I could take him from here, amigo. I know I could do it.”

Ikinya reached over and gently pushed the rifle aside. “That’s over two clicks from here and we both know neither of us are the best recons. Besides....we need to consider the collegium. I don’t know how the other syndicates would react if we...liquidated...such a key player. It could be disastrous for not just you and me, but for everyone if there was all out war between the syndicates—a total abandonment of the Armistice.”

“Does it matter? He’s down there murdering innocent people. He is no different than the Chos—“

KERBLAM! There was another discharge of a repulsor rifle. A second technician keeled forward to the ground.

Both Ikinya and Cedro cursed out loud. “Amigo, we CANNOT do nothing!” said Cedro. “This is not what we’re about!”

“No, I know, I know!” Ikinya said with a frustrated tone. “The limiters in my neural-net failed. Boost the scene please and splice me in to your feed.”

“We don’t have time for this, man! Once there were four, now there are two!” Cedro complained, but he did as he was asked and Ikinya could once again hear Osvaldo’s tirade.

“Nobody asked for your technology.... Nobody asked for your godless terraforming ambitions.... Can you not see where your science and your machines have taken us? None of this DOOM would be upon us now if it weren’t for your Arclight and the arcfolding endeavors....like playing with the space-time continuum as though it were a cat’s cradle of yarn. Do NOT approach the cogs of the divine as a schoolyard child! Did it not ever occur to you that perhaps the Melding is an agent of the Gods on high, delivered unto us as a most-deserved smackdown for having sored too close to their domain?!”

Cedro glanced over at Ikinya. “What is he talking about? I’ve never heard Osvaldo espouse such beliefs. He doesn’t even sound like he normally does.”

“Oh, rest assured, he doesn’t believe a word that he’s saying. It’s just smoke and mirrors, just horse shit. But God, he’s an awful actor. Look at the expressions on the faces of his colleagues. They’re having a hard time hearing it all too.”

Both prisoners now were sniveling, their hands behind their head. Suddenly, the one on the left got to his feet and made a dash for it. Unfortunately, having kneeled for so long, his legs were mostly asleep and his attempt to flee was laughable. Several mercs followed him with their firearms but Osvaldo shook his head. He gave the prisoner nearly a full minute lead time before he exchanged his repulsor rifle for a plasma cannon from a nearby accomplice. He brought the cannon to bear and fired a single shot. The runner was conflagrated in mid-stride, leaving not even ashes by the time the plasma flare had faded. The last prisoner remaining on his knees continued to blubber loudly.

“My family has roots in this region dating back for five hundred years. When did your peoples move here, hmm?” Osvaldo nudged the prisoner with his boot to solicit a response.

“Popou came just after the Nine Year Winter.” The prisoner sniveled. “Our bloodline came from Greece.”

“Yes, well I’m afraid you’ve overstayed your welcome. By all means, take your terraforming equipment and return to your home country and make it habitable again. But leave coral forest alone! This is our home!” Osvaldo paused for a moment, and then added, “Perhaps you’re not hearing me. I told you to get!” This time he placed his boot on the prisoner and pushed him over. The man looked up from the ground, trying to read Osvaldo’s face, and then got to all fours.

“Thank you, sir, thank you.” He gushed.

“Get!” Osvaldo shouted, and the prisoner scampered off, expecting to be shot the entire time but he never was. He scrambled as fast as his limbs would carry him southward, toward the safety of Copacabana.

“Now that was curious.” Ikinya observed to Cedro. “What do you make of that?”

“It’s like he wants his crime to be known. It’s like he wants....credit?”

In the next moment, Osvaldo and two of his thugs went into the agitator’s silo. Soon after, they could see one of his men working on the laser through the partially-open dome. It looked as though an engineer was using several tools to open a portion of the agitator.

“Maybe he really is against terraforming?” Cedro asked. “A modern day Luddite. A Green, you know. One of those poor buggers who thinks it’s mankind’s time to get our ticket punched, well... who are we to mess with fate?”

“Osvaldo? Hell no. There is something else underfoot here.”

A minute later, the engineer on the agitator made an excited exclamation and then carefully handed down an artifact to someone out of sight. Neither of the men up on the ridge were able to see what it was, but they didn’t have long to wait. Osvaldo stepped out from the silo with a foot-long glass tube held carefully between his hands. It looked like an antiquated sparkplug, and Osvaldo seemed unable to draw his eyes away from it. A smile crept up on his face, favoring his left side more than his right. “We’ve got it!” He cried out. “We’ve GOT IT!” A cheer went up from the mercenaries all around.

“Got it?! Got what?!” Ikinya hissed in frustration.

“I’m already on it,” Cedro said, running a spectral analysis with an alpha spectrometer from his remote sensing toolkit. There was a *bing* sound, followed by an automated female voice which said, “Tellurium<sup>Cy</sup>.”

“Tellurium-crystite? I’m not even familiar with this hybrid. You?” Cedro asked.

“No, and that’s probably why Osvaldo wants it. Scarcity makes a seller’s market. My guess is that’s why Osvaldo is even here.” Ikinya sighed. “That *babaca* doesn’t give a rat’s ass whether we terraform or not. He killed those three men and let one flee just as a red herring....to throw the Accord off his true motives. He’s all about the cash-money. He’s gonna take that canister of tellurium-crystite and sell it to the highest bidder. He may even use an anonymous avatar to sell it back to the Accord themselves. What a *bastardo*.”

“I can still take the shot. At least let me crack the canister.” Cedro toggled his iron sight between Osvaldo’s cranium and the canister.

“No, give me a second. I’ve got an idea.” Ikinya said, quickly surfing through a rolodex of contractors in the region’s database. “There was a man I met once, at the Thump Dump. His handle was something like Hurricane or Typhoon.” He was speaking distractedly in a long drawn out cadence, sifting through petabytes of data as he spoke.

“No, here he is. Typhon, rather. Leader of an extraction squad called the Hellhounds.” Ikinya bounced the file over to Cedro’s viewport so they could both read it simultaneously. A 3-dimensional mug shot of the man slowly turned in the upper-left hand corner while a video looped in the upper-

right. He was a very muscular individual with a long list of accomplishments. The video appeared to be genuine combat footage of Typhon under fire. He was wearing a dreadnaught battleframe and had hunkered down into turret mode, unleashing a torrent of lead from his chain gun.

Ikinya looked at Cedro thoughtfully. “If we do nothing right now, we both know how this will likely play out. Osvaldo will escape with the Tellurium<sup>Cy</sup> because the Accord is about as responsive as an oil tanker in the water. But then give it a week, and the Accord will be all over our asses in any number of ways. Every crime syndicate will stand to lose, not just the Shishidos. It makes for bad business for everyone.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Cedro said. “It’s one thing to pick the low-hanging fruit, but another to burn the whole damn orchard. Osvaldo is bringing undesired attention on us all.”

Ikinya nodded. “So we’re gonna phone this in as a job, nothing more. I’ll open a contract via AnonyGram in Dredge. Say, 30 grams if Typhon and his hellhounds can route these rapsCALLIONS out? 50 if they recover the Tellurium-crystite canister?”

“Oi, that’s a lot of cash. I may take a run at the pool myself.” Cedro joked.

“Uh-huh, I don’t think so.” Ikinya mentally drew up the contract details and sent it with a single-use security certificate onward to AnonyGram. The headhunter would then immediately reroute the offer to Typhon at this very moment. Ikinya figured there’d be a minute delay while Typhon considered the details, but within five seconds he had a confirmation back from AnonyGram. The contract had been accepted.

“Dang, *irmão*, I think you offered too high of a bounty.” Cedro chided.

Ikinya laughed. “Yeah, maybe. That was the fastest acceptance I’ve ever had.” He zoomed his optics in again on Osvaldo, who was holding his prized possession above his head for all his syndicate to see. “I hope the Hellhounds deliver. The world would be a better place without that punk around.”

As Osvaldo turned around, showing his men the canister, his eyes seemed to scan the horizon and for a moment—only a moment, it felt like his gaze lingered on a high precipice some distance away, shrouded with palm trees. Ikinya and Cedro both instinctively shrunk back from the edge in as much as their battleframes would allow. They looked at one another, wondering if their position was compromised.

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