

out on a limb



by saii

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An Errico Story
set in the Eclipse Phase universe

In which our dogged defender of delinquent diasporas
decides to dip his digits into some dodgy dealings,
but ends up diving deeper than desired.

by Saii

I wrote this as a continuation of a character I enjoyed using as a GM, who has had a few shorts to his credit already including:

[Fall Memories](#)

[Server Bound](#)

[Fork in the Road](#)

[Sims' Story](#)

out on a limb is intended to be semi-introductory in style, so aims to be generally accessible to general readers of sci-fi while exploring the city-station of Locus through Errico's eyes. As ever, many thanks go to [Posthuman](#), creators of [Eclipse Phase](#), for making such an interesting setting to play in — support them if you can!

Artwork credits

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Errico's eyes hurt.

Or rather they didn't hurt exactly, his new body seemed to be in good health and the uploading process seemed to have gone well, rather the sensation of "seeing" was giving him a migraine. Or whatever the octopus equivalent might be.

Not only did his new eyes function differently compared to a human body*, focusing through movement rather than changing the shape of their lenses, they had no blind spot. Even more bizarrely his skin itself could also sort of ... see ... light and colour. The brain was filtering this information oddly, taking a more um, topographical (ish?) approach which was then reported across the whole of his body.

Ugh ... try not to think about it. Pink elephants, pink elephants.

He struggled with his equanimity for a while as he lay prone, before deciding he should try something else. Movement perhaps?

Oh nooooo. Wait, wait, stop. Hang on. *Moving* with eight semi-autonomously controlled limbs and no bones proved to be an entirely different additional exercise in nausea and added a general level of discombobulation which was, frankly, giving him the screaming ab-dabs. It was body horror without an obvious injury.

"So this is what an 'exotic' morph does to you," he muttered, damply, under his breath†. "Try new experiences you thought, it'll give you a better understanding of uplifts you thought. Silly prick."

* "Morph," to use the technical term for a body designed for an uploaded mind to pilot.

† Well not breath, exactly, his morph had an extra organ to simulate human speech, so it was more a squeezed sac of air with specialised vocal folds which he hadn't quite worked out yet. What he actually said was "shhhuu thsh sss woor muurruurfff ttu ... duuu too wooo."

Errico was recuperating in what he supposed must be a post-op lounge at specialist clinic Cephalo-bods*, though being half-full of tepid water the room looked (felt?) more like a scene from an old Earth disaster movie. His ALI “helper” Mal the Muse wasn’t really helping, having taken this golden opportunity to throw in a visual overlay of patrolling sharks for a little extra atmosphere.

He was at least glad of the dimness of the room and the presence of centrifugal “gravity” in this part of the habitat as he mentally ticked off his plans for the day.

- First, flail about for the next few hours trying to do the pat-head-rub-tummy trick of controlling twice as many appendages as usual, none of them legs;
- Second, move on to some more advanced flailing while also learning how to manoeuvre around in zero-gee;
- Sometime in the afternoon, meet reps from the uplift freedom movement to discuss plans for misdirecting a hostile corporate agent who they’d caught out and were currently dangling at the end of a line. Hopefully don’t embarrass yourself too much;
- Meet said agent and feed her some counterproductive info to land her superiors in a mess of trouble;
- And finally, raid whatever cell she’s part of and clear them out of town.

It would be another busy rotation.

* Lead clinicians Doc Ock, Armstrong and Inkerbell were fond of puns.

In the Lane

Errico had formed the opinion, shortly after he arrived on the free station of Locus* for the first time in the year of our Fall 3AF† and witnessed the sheer variety of morphs people were moving around in, that it was important to try and walk (or possibly float) a mile in someone else's shoes if you wanted to understand them.

Locus was a perfect place for such sentiments, hosting both a wide variety of habitat modules and the largest population of uplifted species anywhere outside maybe Valles New Shanghai — a Martian city 16 times' its size. Facilities on Locus weren't necessarily the bleeding edge in specifically human tech, but for anything to do with non-human morphology the city offered endless opportunities.

Because of this he had tried several different morphs in the last few years, from the cheapest of pods to slitheroids (moving forwards on an undulating tail takes some getting used to), and had spent a particularly difficult period trying to do volunteer work in the water utility lines as a dolphin — he really needed to get something done about the claustrophobia he'd picked up there. But this was a serious challenge as far as bodies went.

Trying to get under the skin of the Locus octopus population had become something of a priority for Errico in recent months, as he had found himself frequently in their company. While his nominal role in the habitat was as

* Station is something of an understatement. If anarchists did capitals Locus would undoubtedly be it. The largest [Nuestro Shell](#) ever built housing two million souls, and still growing apace, Spike City sits in a leisurely outer system orbit somewhere ahead of Jupiter, looking like an 11km-diameter cross between the Death Star and a gigantic glowing pincushion, where every available surface has at some point been the frontline of an ongoing art-graffiti riot.

† After Fall. The Fall was era-defining inasmuch as it ended the era of humans living on Earth if they wanted to avoid being murdered by leftover creations from an AI [singularity](#) event which, to be completely honest, had not gone well.

a general-purpose hacker and fixer his *real* job was decidedly less benign, involving copious amounts of cloak and occasional dagger.

Locus was a happy-go-lucky sort of libertarian burgh, but it had also been locked into a cold war with the Planetary Consortium, an inner-system cartel of hypercorps controlling Mars, Mercury and much of Luna, for the last two years.

A former indentured servant of leading Consortium shareholder firm Fa Jing, Errico had escaped the company's clutches a few years ago to become a driven soldier in this underground conflict. To that end he had been a founding member of the Search And Bash Operations Team (Sabot), a secretive cell-based organisation which had scored a number of quiet victories while maintaining unofficial watch over their opposite corporate numbers in the spy game.

His antipathy towards corporate Mars was shared by the neo-octopus community, which remained heavily discriminated against in the inner system and regarded Locus as a rare safe zone for their species*. Several had joined as Sabot members, and while they were a difficult bunch to work with sometimes, coming at things from a very different mental state to humans, they were also some of the most effective anti-hypercorp operatives around, particularly excelling in low-gee environments.

It was a trio of these that he was due to meet, and they'd been more than a little pleased to hear (poorly as it turned out — he'd never realised their audio range was so limited) that he would be taking the, ahaha, plunge and coming to their water module for a change.

He'd discharged himself from Cephalo-bods after a couple of hours of testing his new arms and was back in the micro-gee environment of Locus proper, gingerly hauling himself along towards an inter-spar tram service for his jaunt to aquatic pub Spin Cycle. He was feeling extraordinarily clumsy but having suckers on his arms and legs was actually pretty handy when gravity no longer held sway, and he felt he was making reasonable time as he pulled himself past a bewildering array of humans, uplifts,

* Being products of somewhat hit and miss gene-tinkering, animal uplifts, such as the neo-octopus, were looked down on by the more conservative sections of human society. A human resleeving into an octopus body wasn't unheard of, but remained rare at least in part because the bipedal mind isn't really equipped to live in an eight-limbed, beaked extra from a Jules Verne novel.

synths and the occasional artificial intelligence — always notable for their air of mild bafflement — that had for whatever reason decided to spend time in meatspace.

Locus was hard work for even the enhanced spatial awareness of a transhuman mind, and more so when said mind was encased in the body of a different species. Unlike in the average regimented tunnel layout of an asteroid hab, or on the gravity-spun toroids of inner-system city-stations, direction could sometimes seem pretty nominal on Locus. Modules built around its enormous forest of spars and rings almost always had unique, and sometimes disconcertingly experimental, layouts that were as likely to be designed for amusement or artistic effect as for efficient movement.

In the event that a visitor found themselves in some sort of sub-Escher maze or twisting Man Ray-inspired monochrome anteroom the standard solution was to point toes “down” towards the centre of the station, where a particularly massive art installation known as the Amoeba glowed and writhed and all the the station’s many spars met — but that could seem fairly meaningless if said visitor was short a window, or on a module spun to create its own gravity, pushing outwards towards heavens-knew-where. It wasn’t uncommon to bounce from a low-gee module to a zero-gee travelator and get pulled through into a fully-spun habitat in a matter of minutes. This disorienting system was tough to get used to and most people, at least when they weren’t pretty solidly local, relied heavily on their AI Muse helpers to guide them around.

As he passed from one habitat to another Errico lashed out his arms, grabbing onto handholds and short conveyor belts along the wall, letting them pull him forward and then launch him further into the busy corridor roads on this stretch of Novi-Gulyai ring. He did his best to avoid inadvertently whapping people with trailing limbs as he passed through wide bulkhead doors and skirted round clusters of beings who floated slowly on meandering walks, watching, or sometimes participating in, scratch skits and spontaneous performances as they went. Weird smells (felt through his ... arms? Wtf ...) and AR overlays warning of loose drug vapours assailed his senses as Mal messaged him directions. Left a bit, mind the mini-skiff racing route ahead ...

He arrived at the station just in time to catch a tram headed in what looked like a definitive sort of Downward direction.



A Beautiful Sight

Just along the road from the Amoeba itself, aquatic uplift pub Spin Cycle comprised a small, water-filled module which swung slowly through space at the end of a short airlock arm, gimballed around Nurnburg spar, to provide just enough gravity so that a small “surface” air pocket was provided where mammalian species could breathe. Its heavily-reinforced transparent walls gave a revolving 360 degree view of the station, which might have made a different sort of clientele nauseous, but was enjoyed by the regulars. Mostly run in the day-to-day by ALI* servers, the pub’s decision-making and more complicated business was run by a small joint crew of aquatics.

Spin Cycle was something of a departure from the quarter’s usual architecture, which catered primarily to uplifted avians so tended towards open spaces, high perches and interesting swoops, but had become popular with the water-borne uplift crowd. The spot was a major hub for physical meets, taking advantage of its stunning views of the Amoeba, position right near the heart of the station and relative privacy from the fast-moving thin air of mainstream transhuman society. The pub’s reputation for silence when too many landlubbers were present meant its beat stayed submersive.

Errico wasn’t really ready to blend in with the early-afternoon set, but his contacts didn’t appreciate tardiness so he laboured on, pushing

* Artificial Limited Intelligence. As opposed to AGI at human levels of general cleverness, or the Artificial Super Intelligences (ASIs) which had so comprehensively out-thought humanity during the Fall. ALIs ran most of the automated systems on Locus, but unlike their smarter AGI and ASI cousins didn’t have the capacity for true self-awareness or self-improvement. This had two main benefits, the first being that they could run on even very small servers, meaning every transhuman and vaguely complicated machine could have their own Muse helper. The second was that they weren’t going to start disassembling people en masse using unstoppable super-tech any time soon. Probably.

through the last of the crowd to an airlock, where a fake-coral sign glowed and belched out whale-song for a moment before Mal cut the feed. Errico was old enough to get a bit uncomfortable with the New Age hippy connotations, no matter the reclamation of its powerful cultural messages by neo-whales themselves.

The blundering awkwardness of his new body meant cycling the airlock was not quite as inconspicuous as he'd hoped. A moment of subconscious panic as the transition chamber filled with water saw him hold his breath uselessly until he realised what he was doing and as the secondary lock opened he choked loudly before tumbling inelegantly into the room. Several eyes of different types rolled to regard him for a moment, then away again.

Looking around, he saw/felt a dozen or so forms of various sizes nearby. A neo-dolphin cruised slowly near the large room's "surface" blowing bubbles gently, half-asleep. A couple more drifted in the far corner, chattering in what they evidently thought was a quiet tone but which had a curiously penetrating quality to his new ears*, grating and unsettling. The atmosphere was slow, ponderous, broken by whirring pool scrubbers and the muffled noise of drones bringing baggies of light narcotics, food or useful items to customers. Behind what, for the sake of argument, might on dry land be called a bar, the day volunteer was busy smacking a fabricator with a utilitool — they never could get the things to work quite right underwater.

Errico eased himself over to a booth of sorts, where fake coral and smoothed stones were piled together to provide a halfway house between utility and a cheesy effort at undersea cosiness. The decor was pretty terrible, it had to be said, but that wasn't what uplifts came for. They wanted to be where everyone could pronounce their name. Well, that and the sights.

The spot's transparent shell had probably the best views anywhere on Locus, offering a spectacular vantage of both the Amoeba pulsating directly below and a seemingly endless array of modules splaying out all around, disappearing as they jutted upwards into a haze of bright lights, coloured and decorated in 10,000 different styles.

* "Not ears, 'Statocyst'," Mal reminded him. Human-centric terminology really *sticks*.

Murals, abstracts and ornate filigrees splattered every which way across thousands of building exteriors like some mad god's dreamscape. Not an advert to be seen, but endless manifestos, slogans, poetry and moving scenes, both abstract and representational.

Something about that fantastic variety of expression spoke deeply to him and as he waited for his comrades in arms, gazing through the soft warp of moving water he felt almost peaceful, for all the discomfort of his physical dysmorphia. Nothing about Locus was built to the strictures of profit and personal income, so people collectively took time to make their homes beautiful. That stark contrast against the brutalising contracted "life" of an indenture contract on Mars, the one he'd escaped only through deception and some highly-dubious hacks* a few years prior, was what drove him. He was prepared to be brutal in turn if it defended these rare, bright little idealists who twittered and bickered and whistled and daubed infinite horizons on their walls.

As he gazed into the city's heights a darkness fell upon his forward-right arm, and he refocused to find the enigmatic presences of his partners in crime. Three octopuses, each rearing huge in his mind's eye before he remembered that he was now their size rather than human height.

The neo-octopus had, typically for the early efforts of human-centric gene splicers, been sized so that, upright, they came only to the shoulder height of an average human — though a fully-spread set of arms took up a great deal of space width-ways. He'd never considered that this placed them in the position of "child" in comparison, a decision which had little logic given the vast variety of sizes originally available. Now that he was their own size however the difference stood stark.

He knew them as Lod, Pal and Red, but was surprised to find that his Muse was introducing them in a very different manner now he had the morph to understand.

* Hacking was something of an art form in the post-Fall Solar System, with a huge variety of uses for both good and ill ever since the web was replaced with a much more comprehensive modern mesh linking almost everything through innumerable decentralised server systems and with almost limitless information flow. Hacking on Locus however, with its lack of state secrets, corporate property guardianship or even many criminal interests, was mostly boring as hell unless you fancied watching the end of *Love in the Time of TITANS* before anyone else. And even then you could probably just ask.

“-- *complex texture | paleish colour with redder overtones* -- Red -- *color | texture | non-threatening posture* -- offers greetings” Mal whispered to him.

As a human he had recognised basic colour but the sheer complexity of texture and posture, and its role in their communication, had sailed over his head. Red had just been ... Red. A lugubrious presence with a penchant for Hawaiian-style wetsuits that typically sculled along just below his head height.

Clumsily, with much prodding from Mal, he returned a hello, concentrating on trying to convey through colour and shape what humans might say in words and producing a ripple of -- *colour | texture: amusement* -- among his comrades.

-- *colour | texture: tolerant* -- “Thankyou for trying Errico” the leader of the group, Lod, expressed in English, “but if we are to be efficient we should probably stick to human language for now. Neo-octopus body language is ... complicated ... for your sort of mind, we’ve found.”

Lod’s own textures were rough, his colours darker. A simple, practical personality to the human way of thinking who became enigmatic and unsettlingly controlled when viewed by one of his own, who could understand the rocklike hold he had over what he communicated.

Errico relaxed slightly at the shift back to English, but stiffened again almost immediately with a thought. Turning to his left, he said in a slightly mortified tone: “I’m sorry -- *complex texture | paleish colour with redder overtones* -- I didn’t realise how calling you Red comes across in neo-octopus, I didn’t realise I was being so crass.

Red waved an arm slightly. -- *posture: not worried* -- “You do your best, given your limitations. I can hardly expect you to pronounce my name properly with a blank skin.” -- *colour | texture | posture: serious* -- “In any case, we’re here for business. Pal’s got something for you.”

Pal, a hulking mass of taciturn compared to her comrades, the muscle of the group, leaned over and very, very carefully deposited a small object

in a black bag on the smoothed rock table in front of him. “This is me done,” she intoned, before abruptly speeding off back to the airlock. Red nodded after her, while Lod pointed at the object and sent an encrypted silent message to Errico. “Open it only when no-one can see. Tell nobody.” Then they followed their comrade to the airlock.

* * *

Errico’s mind spun over what he’d found secreted inside the bag as he rode a tram directly up through the interior of Zenith Spar, towards the north pole of Locus. The service was quick and getting out to the ends didn’t take long, kilometres of plazas, gardens, hydroponics farms, maintenance and cornucopia facilities flashing and out of vision as he sped towards his next meeting, where he’d be making contact with this corpo agent Sabot was investigating.

Computronium wasn’t just rare, it was “sell and live a life of privilege” rare on most inner system habs. Hypercorps would literally kill for it regardless of the potential dangers. There were only a few places in the system where it could be found, all in lethally dangerous quarantine zones where singularity ASI monsters the TITANs* had been busily upgrading themselves to godhood while doing their best to wipe out transhumanity. It had been theorised about long before, but TITANs had actually gone and produced the stuff, a substance comprised at the sub-atomic level as a perfectly engineered substrate in which calculations could be processed at physics-edge speed.

* The TITANs were Artificial Super-Intelligences (ASIs) created by Earth researchers which, shortly after they’d improved their own cleverness beyond that of humanity, sparking the AI singularity, unaccountably decided the best thing to be done with their creators was chop our heads off and imprison our minds on their own, inescapable super-servers. This was considered to be something of a bad review.

He didn't even want to know where the trio had gotten it, but a tagged readme file assured him it was both clean of TITAN influence and fully operational. Just the pendant-sized piece he now had stashed in a sucker on his lower-right arm made him feel like a target, even in the mostly entirely safe environs of Locus. You could model entire virtual worlds in it, run hundreds of minds — or hide something truly scary. If it was known he was carrying around something so potentially dangerous, even screened, on Locus he'd be toast, and not just in his current body. People had been perma-dead for less.* The crowd would turn, local militias would send the sort of people who vaporise first and questions don't even matter.

He felt like a prize fool for taking it at all. He hadn't realised the octopus crew were intending quite such serious business, and they had seemingly decided to up the ante of his involvement after seeing him volunteering to sleeve as one of them. That they could even provide something like computronium was a cause for mild concern, the number of beings with the resources to get hold of it was very, very limited.

It was though, he had to admit, a perfect foil for the job at hand. If he could deliver it to the agent (and get them to accept it) a public leak about trade in TITAN artefacts would constitute a major black mark against their handlers. The Consortium itself would take a fair beating and the consequences for whichever firm was behind the trade would be significant.

The readme explained the basic plan was to do the handover in an uninhabited spot which theoretically had little surveillance but in fact had nano-probes up the wazoo. He would pass off his undercover identity as being that of an octopus gangster, then as soon as the deal was done they would send in militia to wherever she took the pendant. The security raid would be a very publicly noisy one, making it impossible for the incident

* Generally speaking death was less final post-Fall than had previously been the case. High-powered mind-recording technology allowed not only for the recording and publishing of lived experiences through XR broadcasts, and copy-pasting your mind into new bodies, it had also been incorporated into a backup system known as the cortical stack. Stacks, inserted into the neck, were standard on almost all morphs and recorded the mind from moment to moment. They essentially acted as a black box to revive someone with all their memories intact in the event of an untimely demise.

to be ignored by politicians and netting solid evidence of some shady corporate malpractice.

The low-surveillance spot chosen was a little way along from an inhabited zone of Flores, a, sinuous-looking spar covered in gigantic art nouveau-style mosaics, murals and sculpted hab shapes which peaked just a couple of rings out from Zenith. More urbane and obviously technological towards the city core, as it got further out the spar had been turned over to gardens and a skilfully recreated feel of quiet rural permacultures, reflecting its local populace of gentle pseudo-spiritualists, before these too eventually shaded out and a series of utility works began, with ALIs producing clean water, air and power for the wider region.

Even so, long after he floated past the outermost local residence, receiving a cheery four-armed wave from an extravagantly bearded eight-foot tall Green Man morph*, the locals' influence was everywhere as he headed towards those utility sections. Broad leafy plants clung to every available surface of the module, splaying wildly in the absence of gravity and drinking in warm artificial light. Insect life, a mix of artificial and real — all genetically tampered with to survive micro-gee — buzzed and swarmed through thick, sweet-smelling air, which wafted gently in a perpetual breeze as scrubbers sucked debris and contaminants away. Tiny birds, modded to instinctively tidy the area as they moved from plant to plant snapping up prey, cheeped and squabbled just out of sight. Particularly prevalent in low-gee were hummingbirds, which could not only, unlike most unmodified avians, stay hydrated without the use of gravity, they were also naturally designed to hover rather than glide, meaning almost no expensive gene-tricks were needed to adapt them for station life. They flitted across his path so fast his eye could barely register it, just a moment of colour blur like the after-image of a strong light.

Pulling himself through increasingly thick vegetation, starting to feel a little nervously claustrophobic about the lack of space, Errico eventually reached the airlock he was after, leading directly into another module where an automated system was busily breaking down waste

* Brenda, according to her Ego ID, was one of the most capable habitat construction experts on Locus, work which kept her reputation high enough to justify spending most of her time running eccentric experiments "forking" (where a person [clones their own mind](#)) intra-body. Best not to think about how that works.

into its constituent atoms for re-use in fabricators station-wide. It was a noisy business somewhat muffled, he was surprised to see, by a layer of vegetation which had grown through the open bulkhead door and hadn't been cut back. Some sort of ivy clung to the readout panels and machine casing, rearing up through pull-handles on the walls and half-covering low-slung ceiling lights, casting deep curving shadows into the room and filling it with a smell of densely-packed fresh vegetation, with just a little dampness in the air from a layer underneath that had begun to decompose.

Definitely not up to code this place. He could understand why it was picked. With fewer people around to watch or care, in these sorts of areas the habitat's otherwise all-encompassing public camera networks tended to go longer between maintenance sessions and break down more often, making secret meetings a much more plausible proposition.

He needed such anonymity given his payload, and he was also running a double layer of fake IDs which, at surface level, proclaimed him to be Larry, a comms repair squid with a minimally-interesting reputation around town. Below that was a "hidden" ID which his target would be searching out almost immediately on their arrival, that of a Triad courier known as Bubbles with a fairly decent gangster rep. Errico was feeling pretty clandestine as he settled onto a comfortable perch within sight of the door, dislodging a hummingbird as he did so. The little animal buzzed at him angrily for a moment before streaking away into the gardens beyond.

* * *

It was about half an hour later when his mark finally turned up, pausing as a dark shape in the entrance to look around before pulling through into the room. She was sleeved in a bouncer — a style of humaniform morph designed for low-gee environments which included some notable features, including prehensile feet and tail for gripping surfaces. The body

had a tough slimness which aided getting around in cramped habitats, and was a very common sight on Locus, which made it ideal for getting around unnoticed.

The face she'd kept mostly androgynous, blank, a sort of standardised look that would be unmemorable anywhere in the Solar System. Her clothes were unmemorable, the sort of hardwearing grey jumpsuit and jacket you could see on any maintenance worker across a thousand utility modules. The only notable thing about her was her hair, a solid wave of blackness tied into a ponytail and half-hidden by her jacket's hood. That was relatively uncommon these days, long hair was a pain to maintain without gravity. He was mildly surprised she'd not gone with a fully-synthetic model to block out expressiveness entirely, but then again Martian hypercorp types did tend to think bio was best. Snobs. It made them bad poker players.

Errico himself had no worries about giving anything away under the dim orange lights, nervous though he was. Even for a practiced eye and with AI help working out what an octopus was thinking was difficult at best for terrestrials, let alone when it had a human mind. He gently waved an arm in greeting and held his other seven limbs skyward to show they weren't holding any weapons.

She started blunt. "You Bubbles?"

He shed his Larry ID for a moment so she could confirm. "Yep, you must be Vandross." She nodded. "How's life on Locus treating you?"

Vandross did a half-grimace. "Lousy. You can't get good service for money, everyone doing things at their own pace and for fuck's sake, how much does a 'have a nice day' cost around here? I swear when I get back to Mars I'm going on a restaurant crawl just to get the taste of uppity hippy out of my head."

He was feeling better about doing the job already, but played along. "Oh don't get me started on the lack of service culture, let alone that knitting circle which passes for their docks management.* This is what happens when you don't have a proper chain of command or a commercial motivator."

* Okay that actually was a legit complaint. Seriously how hard is it to decide whether to give priority clearance for a militia ship chasing a runaway kidnapper ... yes of course Frank's worried about his fruit spoiling but ffs that's ... alright is consensus really the priority here? Oh he's relented but dinged the militia's reputation has he? Ugh, whatever, at least it can go but there'll be words about this later. Bloody anarchists ...

“Yeah, sure.” Short and pointed, this Vandross, Errico thought — Mal was reporting an active sensor sweep as they lapsed into silence and she cast a decidedly wary eye over him for a few moments. He wasn’t too worried, the surveillance they’d reinstalled was high-end nanotech, passive reception for later pickup. The only thing a sweep would get was dust.

“Octopus isn’t your normal morph,” she said at length.

Shit. Erm... “No, but it’s very good for hiding the way I walk, and any tics I might have. Also it’s glam as hell.” She nodded, but said nothing. The upside of gangland culture, there’s always a reason to be looking a bit shifty and it doesn’t do to pry.

“Alright, so I’m supposed to be picking something up from you here, but my side hasn’t told me what.”

Errico didn’t have to feign nervousness, a couple of his arms waved agitatedly on their own and he subconsciously drew himself slightly further into the foliage, pressing up against the metal of utility pipes beneath. “Yeah I have it, but honestly I had no idea what it would be either when I took the commission. I’ve been skittish about this one, it could get me in a *lot* of trouble.”

“You want more payment here? Is that it?” She leaned in threateningly.

“Yeah, and I want to know for sure that it’s not coming back to me. I don’t want to be popped and tortured for the next 20 years by some dead-eyed cartoon corporate henchman looking for info.”

Her eyes narrowed as he spoke, and she drifted forward until their faces were inches apart, thrown into shadow under the lights. She bared her teeth, semi-feral. “Do you know who I work for? *I’m* ‘henchman looking for info’ and you don’t fuck my firm around, ‘Bubbles’. We’re doing a deal here, and you can either finish it or you can go to sleep a few weeks from now and wake up in a broken pod on some nowhere asteroid mining shitbricks with the underclasses.” For a half-second she lifted her lapel and flashed a small badge, an old-fashioned blue shield with a moniker: Direct Action.

Errico was taken aback. Usually the big Martian security firms weren’t so blunt about operating on Locust as it tended to get them turfed out. She must be in a hurry to give that tidbit up, especially to a gangster she didn’t know from Eve. He decided to brazen it out a bit for the sake of plausibility, and sent her a clean Martian account number.

“Direct Action’s scary, but this is ‘every nasty bastard from Sol to the Kuiper Belt on my suckers’ scary. Double the fee and make the guarantee or you’ll not see anything interesting today.”

She glared at him for a long moment. “Half again on the original fee. Keep pushing and I’ll personally cut your tentacles off with a pair of scissors I’ve made out of your beak, and space you.”

“Done. And they’re arms by the way.” She managed a half-grimace which could have been a smile. As soon as the credits were in he spat his pendant out to the air with a sense of profound relief, and watched it spin slowly into Vandross’s hand. As she pushed herself away and held it up for appraisal, seconds ticked by in silence. Presumably her Muse was appraising it. After a long moment her eyes widened slightly.

“I’ve not seen this stuff outside movies,” her voice was hushed.

“Yeah, you can see why I was worried, to be honest I’m glad it’s your problem now. And you might want to think about who I work for, if they can get this stuff. Don’t threaten me again.”

She nodded absent-mindedly, still absorbed in the pendant. “Yeah, right. No stabby unless I mean it”. Her eyes flicked back to him, bright and hard. “I always do.”

Ericco rippled in amusement. “Alright as long as we’re square then.” She held his eye for a second as though testing his level of insouciance — he stayed steady-eyed until she had gone back to appraising her prize.

Then, casually, “fancy a dance tonight?”

She looked back over at his bulbous head, his quivering, half-controlled fleshy arms either stuck to surfaces or floating, unattended, in the air. “A dance.”

“Sure, I mean how often do you get to see a human try and micro-gee dance in an octopus body while off his face on whatever uppers are fashionable for cephalopods these days? And if you’re heading back to Mars soon you might as well see the nightlife before you go.”

Another long pause. “Alright, *after* I’ve got this off my hands.”

Ericco ... well whatever it showed up as he meant it to be a grin. “Groovy.”



By The Fire

Errico headed back from the handover to a Sabot safehouse feeling much better. The hand-off had been good, even if Vandross had worked out he wasn't quite what he seemed, and the trio had managed to keep a tracking eye on her as she scooted away into the bowels of Louise Michelle Spar, a French-speaking quarter of Locus best known for the Bourse de Travail*. He was to meet her there later, and see what else he could glean from a night on the tiles. Honestly he was surprised she'd agreed, but maybe she was fishing too. He'd need to be careful.

Safehouses acted a bit differently on Locus, which despite hosting a population of two million remained one of the more low-density urbanised spaces in the Solar System, with vast areas given over to farm co-operatives. While there was (always) a shortage of bodies for the teeming mass of minds who had fled the Fall†, actual living space across the station's 11km-diameter volume was copious and varied enormously. Individual modules were limited in width by the dimensions of the Spars they sat on (though could be hundreds of metres in length) but could be tailored to all kinds of climatic conditions. And as long as locally-affected collectives weren't fussed, a new home could be made almost anywhere,

* The Bourse was a unique museum of working-class history housing an amazing array of relics that had miraculously survived the Fall. It was a popular rumour that some of those surviving pieces, including a 'Liberty and Fraternity' banner from the [Peterloo Massacre](#) and a fully-functional Kalashnikov rifle, were so entirely miraculous they could only have been recovered from Earth *after* the Fall. Which if true would mean that not only had the quarantine of Earth been broken, violating all kinds of very serious agreements enforced even by anarchists, but the entire museum was a potential threat to humanity. Curators, if asked, invariably went temporarily deaf before changing the subject.

† Millions of these "infugees" uploaded themselves away from Earth during the war having been unable to save their bodies. Locus had a "morph for everyone" policy to make up for the shortfall but that project was very much ongoing.

or an empty one simply moved into, making for some truly spectacular variation. It wasn't all the pokey, poorly-furnished rooms of pulp movies.

As a quiet sort of collective which liked to move in and out of situations quickly Sabot preferred the short-stay pre-mades, and his octopus handlers had stuck to this maxim while, possibly as a small joke, sorting him out with a small house in a savanna biome 20 minutes up-spar from Louise Michelle spar's Le Grande Avenue. The scorchingly dry hab was under a half-gee equivalent spin, and as he slouched up a dusty path to his temporary new home Errico grumbled at his Muse.

"I swear Mal, when I get out of this body and into one that likes heat I'm going to head to Mercury and go sunbathing for a month."

"Perhaps they're making a point about the occasional difficulties they face on transhuman habitats?"

"Or maybe they're sadists."

"Well you did want to crawl a mile on their arms, or whatever version it was — I'd say they're giving you exactly what you asked for."

"Shut up."

Mal dutifully fell silent, but as Errico entered the house and closed the door behind him the Muse ran an AR overlay of water refraction onto the scene, making the room feel a bit like a very large goldfish bowl, before manifesting himself a few feet away in the shape of a mournful-looking clownfish. As Errico looked at him he blew bubbles pointedly, which popped with a farting noise.

"Arsehole."

Errico turned away in disgust and moved into the living room, a tastefully clean-looking affair with large neo-modernist windows, comfy-looking pale furniture and, ahah, a largeish fabrication unit in the corner. As he closed in on it he was glad to see the model had been designed for quietness in the open-plan room, with sound-insulated cladding covering most of its moving parts and a simple Mesh-based interface removing any need for screens or buttons along its surface, which had instead been covered with passable Tehuelche-inspired design work which seemed to be dotted throughout the house.

Errico finished sending instructions to the fabber for making an Elvis-themed outfit, then while the machine started its business producing his clothes for the evening he found an autochef on the local system and set it to work on some fish, constructed from raw proteins and feedstock using

blueprints pirated from Luna. It was never quite as good as a chef would make in his view — no individual quirks or variations — but it was quick and reliable fare.

It took a few minutes before the smell of his under-construction meal penetrated the ends of his arms, and as he waited Errico found himself staring blankly out of a window into a false-blue sky. Occasional fluffy clouds scudded across what was either a giant wall projection or part of the hab's standard alternate reality package, he couldn't be bothered to find out which. A buzzard wheeled slightly too high on the sky to be real, endlessly marking out its semi-random vigil for old-fashioned rodent life that likely only existed back on the ruins of Earth, if at all.

Vandross had told him altogether too much when she used her company name for leverage, it seemed. It was the link Sabot needed in a chain of research which had previously identified the existence of a hypercorp cell but not its origin or intent. The possibility existed that she was lying but the MO fit well and if true, made the reason for their presence obvious — it was a physical force firm, and it would be wanting to break things.

But wasn't that all just a bit pat? He was wary of trusting in the inadequacies of his opponents. Absent-mindedly Errico took his meal and ran his arms over it for the taste, before drawing the fish under his body and into his waiting beak. As he grabbed and swallowed a call came in which he projected onto a handy wall. It was the trio.

-- *colors | textures: pleased, postures: apprehensive, serious* -- "We've got tasty news and crunchy news Errico, which would you like first?"

"Tasty."

"We kept up with Vandross and have tracked her to Bellegarrigue Place near the Bourse, where she met a contact, currently IDing as Neil Robins. Initial searches have turned up background on them/him and it does indeed seem she's in with Direct Action — he's a known contractor. We think we have their safehouse as well, though even scrubbing through cams for the last few weeks it's not exactly clear how many are in the cell. Four at least, not including Vandross. We've got many guns on standby."

"Crunchy?"

“We think they’re not *just* DA. Their lead contact has run multiple ID imprints since arrival so is difficult to track, but seems to have been connected to some very rocky business handling TITAN works before now — at least two incidents in the last four years. The hab they were on before ... it wasn’t pretty. And it’s unclear whether the destruction was even authorised or some sort of odd freelance thing. Cult is possible, or something else. Unpredictable textures here.”

Errico nodded, cracked a fish bone thoughtfully and glanced over at his Elvis suit. Probably enough time to work up an accessory, he thought. “How do we uncomplicate them?”

The figure on the screen shrugged — an impressive sight on an octopus. “What undoes a tangled fishing net?”

* * *

Ericco’s eyes hurt.

Well, not hurt exactly, but he’d been getting used to a sort of all-body experience of light. His perception was suddenly feeling very ... very human. Oh no.

He lifted his eyelids and stared bleakly upwards. This wasn’t good. He was only remembering up to his last memory backup, done just after he’d ended his call with the trio. And the ceiling beams coming into focus above him looked distressingly medical.

“You died.”

The voice wasn’t unfriendly.

He glanced over at Lod, who was attached to a nearby wall, then at his surroundings. The recuperation bay was warmly lit, spun to one-fifth

gravity. In an effort to allay the alarm of waking up in a new body its decor was muted and comfortable, as though it were a much-used living room in an old mansion house. Red leather-effect armchairs, worn and cosy looking, were arrayed around his bed, which had been placed next to a window screen looking out over a scene he'd not thought about in years — a stretch of the Campagnia coastline in Italy where he had played as a child. Mal must have dredged it up from his memories. The smell of a pre-fall sea, complete with its classic lingering aroma of chemicals and rotten weeds, hung lightly in his mind.

“Ahh fuck. How long?”

“Less than an hour from murder to revival, not too bad. The rush meant your replacement morph ended up as a standard splicer model human, no special mods I regret. We had you on watch and when your vitals went down we sent in some guns, found you quickly. She got your cortical stack though and her morph didn't have one when she killed herself. Efficient.”

Ericco sat up slowly, quietly relishing the presence of a skeleton to support him, and scratched his newly-human head. “Murdering was supposed to be my job, apart from the killing myself afterwards bit. And she had no stack?”

“She was better than you. Much faster. Her body was modded in ways we wouldn't have picked up without heavy duty scanning. Extendable bone shivs in her fingers, carbon nano-tube strangewires in her hair. She sliced you to bits. We don't know how they got a morph like that into the station. Turbulent waters, Errico.”

“Show me what happened.”

Lod squirted a data file at him. “Fair warning, it's not pleasant. Your dancing is truly terrible.”

[Cam 1: 7pm] Errico leaves the house, resplendent in an Elvis octopus costume which glitters like a mirrorball. He pulls himself along the floor slowly in the low-gee environment, stirring up just a little dust as he goes. He exits the hab via the main door.

[Cams 2, 3, 4] His passage is tracked around the larger hab ring to a nearby entrance into Louise Michelle Spar

... *spin on*

[Cam 20] He arrives at the Bourse and pauses on a nearby platform, surveying the scene. Crowds move around him but he draws little notice in his Elvis attire, there are much weirder and more wonderful creatures out and about tonight. A nearby swarm of what looks like bees takes the shape of a man as it hovers in front of and around a synth made from pencil-thin rods splayed out from a single large eyeball. They seem to be flirting.

... *spin on* ...

[7.45pm] A bouncer morph hoves into view, it's Vandross. She's in a bone white jumpsuit with orange trim, instantly noticeable on the camera. She floats to Errico and words are exchanged. They swap pills for the night and swallow, moving off towards Louise Michelle's best-known club, Commune.

[XR log 1: 8.20pm] Through the eyes and body of a reveller, rocking a sensor-overloaded pleasure synth on a truckload of the upper-downer-round-and-roundier designer drug High There. The picture is distorted and filled with noise as the drugs hit various nerve centres. Amongst endless pretty colours and bruising head-gasms ...

... *mute* ...

... Errico is in and out of sight as the reveller thrashes to a heavy beat, possibly even the one being played. He's with Vandross, moving his arms around as though he's having a really *all over* kind of seizure. Occasionally Mal's able to filter the XR audio and an "uhuhur" emanates from that general direction.

... *spin on* ...

[XR Log 2: 9.30pm] A pleasantly drunk news blogger is chatting to a well-known local theatre actor about their latest triumph. Behind the thespian Errico and Vandross can be seen bopping away, her tail casually holding one of his arms. They exchange a few words and float toward the exit, out of view ...

[Cam 27] they tumble into the street and veer wildly, laughing as they weave through the crowds and eventually turn into a dark alley ...

[Cam 28, 9.42pm] They slow and turn to face each other. Errico leans in. An audio mic in a room above, left broadcasting by an absent-minded model hobbyist who had been discussing new Gorgon drone models, picks up a word.

“Sorry.”

A flash of light as a blade is thrust towards Vandross’ abdomen. Then a flurry of movement, too fast for the street cam to pick up, and she’s behind him, fingers turned to hooked claws, seemingly holding him prone with some sort of near-invisible wire.

“I’m not.”

Errico felt a rush of nausea as he saw her cut his arms off, followed by his head. She was utterly dispassionate as she sliced up first him, and then his stack, but sighed when it was done.

“That wasn’t meant to happen yet you fucking bastard. This was a good morph, what a waste.”

Then her head detonated. 9.43pm.

Errico pulled out of the dataset and suppressed an urge to retch. Catching up on your own death never got easier, even when you weren’t remembering it firsthand. He waited for his sense of existential vertigo to die down a bit and glanced over again at the patiently waiting Lod.

“Well I fucked that up, though with no stack to pop I suppose even if I’d killed her we’d be no closer to getting any answers*. Any idea why she would have topped herself afterwards?”

* “Popping” was an alternative to traditional interrogation techniques, involving the murder of a person’s body and theft of their cortical stack. Once in custody a person’s ego could be uploaded to anonymous servers where escape would be nigh-on impossible. They could then be copied and subjected to almost any virtual torture or deception to extract key information. If the subject went mad or needed to be released ... well, you could always use an earlier version. The technique was well known in criminal environs but looked on with revulsion in wider anarchist society and Sabot’s use of it was, as a result, *extremely* hush hush.

“Probably figured we were nearby, had information such that capture wasn’t an option. The total lack of a stack is well outside Direct Action’s standard operating procedure, even for their infiltrators. They prefer encryption, Betas and self-junking models, either more chance of rescue, or less obviously suspicious on a scan. Hints that these people are playing multiple levels, no effort to avoid permadeath. Broader Sabot group is worried.”

Errico nodded (ah, bliss). “Yeah I can imagine. So what’s the new plan?”

“How to deal with an unknown crew of what were thought just corporate hires but turn out to be unknown cultish assassins with specialist morphs and a history of mass death, who we just gave a TITAN artifact?”

“Guns.”

A Snowman

Bellegarrigue Place was, for Locus, a relatively muted sort of affair just down the road from the Bourse, often used by people coming to see the sights. The entrance from the spar itself opened into a zero-g cylinder space 50 metres by 100, with a plaza just beyond the door acting as a large open hub to orient by, studded by lights and spherical plant holders which hung in the air, gently kept in position by little gusts of thrust.

Small units, mostly used just for sleeping, studded the open space curving around half of the wall facing the central open area, while the top of the cylinder consisted of an enormous projection space, capable of showing almost any scene when required but today offering a straightforward realtime view to the outside, where spars and rings stretched for kilometers in every direction into the distance, with drone craft and suited morphs drifting gently between them.

Dominating the scene was a large mural of a bearded figure*, Anselme Bellegarrigue, whose most famous saying hung above him as a holographic projection: “A democrat is not one who commands, but one who disobeys.” Errico enjoyed the sentiment, having suffered as an indenture through the hypocrisies of many so-called democrats who insisted on their right of command as “representatives” or owners for their (unaccountably vote-free) businesses.

The hab was nearly empty as the nominal hour ticked to 11.30pm, unusually so for a busy tourism hotspot. That was intentional. Over the previous hour a plan of attack against the infiltrators had been devised and quietly signed off with collectives all over the habitat, leading to a variety of invitations, warnings and requests for the presence of almost

* Obsession over the Dead Beards Society of early anarchists had died down greatly as the 21st century AD drew on and gender roles became further outdated, but when naming habs and streets those ancient figures frequently made a reappearance, as the roster of recorded 19th century icons remained mostly bearded (and very definitely dead).

all the Bellegarrigue residents that happened to take them out of the upcoming combat zone. At this point barely a couple of dozen stubborn types and a handful of militia were left inside, the latter masquerading as tourists while taking up position.

Errico himself was being handed gear, weaponry and armour and piled with information as he dragged himself down into a side passage just off from the main door, where a cordon had been set up. He wasn't about to miss the fight, and was hoping to get to whatever information they might be hiding.

He necked some combat drugs to take the edge off any fear responses before pulling on the armour and sealing a helmet over his face. An encrypted tacnet overlay snapped into focus giving him multiple overhead views, layout breakdowns and first-person recordings from the militia already inside. He scrubbed through them as a figure in a heavily-armoured synth morph joined the cordon — Ellen Pelloutier, a local militia leader and Sabot member. She was listed on the system as lead coordinator. Good. He'd spent some time with her in VR sims and planning meetings and rated her highly as an efficient and largely unflappable presence in a crisis — plus the lethal results of her habitual tinkering with morph upgrades were hard to deny. She nodded at him while her Muse sent out rapid messages to the gathered force, mostly also in metallic synths prized their higher durability, 30 in total just finishing their prep on either side of the entrance.

“Sorry to hear about your untimely death Errico, how are you feeling?”

“Not too bad considering, they caught it early.”

“Glad to hear it. You alright to run Mesh interference this evening? We've only got three active IDs in that building and we've been quick enough that they shouldn't be worried about their missing comrade yet, but I don't want to get surprised by a hidden infomorph* sting or something.”

“Sure, any backup?”

* Disembodied minds who exist only on the Mesh. Infomorphs were in vast majority made up of people who had survived the Fall but were yet to be given a new body, but some preferred the virtual life and could be formidable presences in conflicts, potentially causing as much mayhem through hacked equipment and even cracked minds as any gun-toting body.

“We’ve got a half-dozen number crunchers who’ve volunteered.” A tacnet link popped up with six icons, mostly hackers of reasonable reputation. He gave her a thumbs-up as she opened comms on #general.

“Everyone copacetic? Backed up? Biomorph users crushed those panic-blockers?” A flurry of virtual nods. “Great. Tactical should be on your feeds, Errico is on Mesh and we’ve got the armory on standby. Follow your entry path overlays and try to keep it quiet until everyone’s in position. The target is obvious now we’re aware of its existence — the house with surprisingly good jamming equipment inside which is blocking our scanners. The hab’s not carrying any critical systems here so weapons are ‘free as fuck’, as the datapacket puts it (thankyou Stan). I know you’re not losing all that much if you die folks but try not to, a dead body is one less gun. Questions?”

A fighter, Amelie, replied: “Yeah this seems very rushed, not a lot of info...”

“It’s very much not ideal. But short notice hab defence is what we’ve been training for, you know your roles.”

Amelie sent a reluctant thumbs-up. It was on.

* * *

Full militia deployment was, as standard, a marvel of smooth operation in the post-Fall environment. AI tactical programmes worked out everything from the broad sweeps of zones of control to individual sight lines at any given point along a combatant’s route. Personal Muses scanned and swept for unknowns as the deployment was carried out, auto-targeting towards anything that looked out of place.

HUD info tickers, AR overlays, audio cues and haptic feedback fed a constant flow of information about the battlezone which was filtered and automatically catalogued based on endless simulspace testing, some of it taking place in real time thanks to their home turf server advantage.

Encased in his armour, Errico moved forward slightly behind the frontline, directing his team as they covertly probed local Mesh signals for anything untoward. Low-profile vectors were taken, staying close to the ground and behind walls wherever possible.

The entire exercise had an eerie silence to it, as without gravity there were none of the percussive giveaway sounds that the militia's boots and heavy frames might have made. No words or signals were given as all information and orders zipped over the shared tacnet. Within two minutes everyone was in position in a layered sphere around an unassuming tan-coloured box house tucked away at the bottom of the module between two other similar houses, with a couple of tattered-looking plants in front of it and large front-facing windows set to an opaque sheen. Exits at the front and back of the building were being covered by a variety of heavy kinetic and energy weaponry, with every militia fighter set at perfect angles for flexible and devastating response in the event of resistance. Errico had posted himself half-behind a wall on the edge of the firezone, scanning for any signals he could hack into. Nothing was showing up, in fact none of the supposed occupants of the house were giving out even basic pings, a fact which was beginning to concern him.

Little stirred as the sphere was completed. To all appearances the swift-moving invasion hadn't disturbed anyone yet. Knowing suicide was a possibility in a raid, and wanting to get hold of at least one of the cell members for interrogation, a smaller four-strong suppression team toting non-lethal weaponry was next up, peeling off and plotting a course to the back door, keeping to a line which allowed maximum uninterrupted firepower at their back.

Originally developed for use against the TITANs (and then promptly outclassed), humanity's abilities when waging precise and devastating war against itself had never been smarter. But such power goes both ways.

When the suppression team reached the back door, three things happened.

First, every entrance to the building opened with a snap, revealing a battery of drone-controlled heavy ordnance which immediately started shooting, shredding the suppression team and laying down a devastating pattern of well-targeted fire that was suddenly taking cues from a network of seemingly pre-prepared microbugs. On timers? He could only guess, but precious moments whiled away as his team tried to brute-force the

newly-active bugs' one-way tactical link and the militia began to return fire of their own, blasting heavy rifle and laser rounds into the house.

Second, it became clear why he'd not been picking anything up — snap scans of the now open house revealed the place was *wired*, like some sort of throwback to the days of TV and desktop computers. The whole building had essentially been air-gapped with the only open reception point being a passive receiver coded to the microbugs' specific transmission. There had been nothing noticeable to hack.

Third, the supposed Direct Action team was not in the building. No human signatures or telltales of any kind were being picked up. Evidently he was not the only one who noticed this, because almost immediately a micro-missile screamed into its front room and exploded, vapourising everything inside with an almighty percussion of the primary explosive going off, followed by munitions from inside the house crackling and booming until they were spent, the sound half-muffled by his helmet's audio controls.

Ellen Pelloutier's voice cracked into the tacnet moments later. "Errico, I've sent two people down there to probe the wreck, go with them. If that wire network has any data left to sift I want it. Everyone else is going house to house. Doors to the hab are sealed. Nine dead, bloody mess." The entire engagement had lasted only seconds.

* * *

He glided down to the smouldering house, glad of his armour's filters to keep out copious amounts of dust suspended in the air. Everything was already being smothered by a coating of foam by ALI fire drones, which clung to surfaces and floated into the atmosphere with the rest of the debris, swiftly leaving a frothy coating on the armour of Errico and the two other fighters. They picked their way through into what had at one point been a living room and was now mostly just a floating junkyard of former weaponry, running a desultory scan over it but finding little more than the forensic basics.

“Yep, this is definitely mangled junk which used to be something else,” one of the militia pair (Li Xiu Ying, according to his tacnet) muttered. Li had outfitted herself in a standard model synth tweaked for athleticism, close to a bouncer in shape but with reinforced bones, mechanical strength, digital reflexes. Her carapace was half-hidden by tightly wrapped slings and fibre bags full of military accoutrements, from spare medical packs for comrades to ammo and battery packs. What wasn’t covered by luggage was either shielded by a layer of combat armour or wrapped up to the joints in light grey ship camouflage fabric, both dulling the shine of her body and muffling any accidental noise.

At a glance it didn’t look like the method behind the DA cell’s magic trick was going to be revealed by the pile of wreckage. Everything had been thoroughly pulverised, shards of gun carcass bouncing off cables which waved and sparked threateningly from their positions embedded in the floor. But there had to be something, surely. Somehow the crew of this surprise bunker had managed to work up a stash of heavy weaponry, drone tech and targeting systems that should have drawn quite a *lot* of attention, not just from the militia.

He grabbed onto a spare bit of foundation which had survived the blast and steadied himself to take in the scene properly, absent-mindedly swiping a hand across his visor to clear away clumps of dirt and foam and leaving reddish-grey smears which did little to improve the view.

As he cast his eyes around the scene, chunks of wall and tiled flooring spun and looped slowly away from the impact zone towards the habitat’s ceiling. Dust and debris expanded into the wider room where scrubber drones were already descending to clear it before anything important or dangerous might be damaged or breathed in. No serial numbers detectable on the former weaponry, obviously, the kit could as easily have been a laborious home-made job. Yeah that was it, the militia sniffer data had caught a telltale scent of exotic nano-fabber feed stocks. But how did they secrete a large fabrication machine in a tourist hotspot in the first place ... piecemeal? *How long were they down here?*

He ran a mesh trace to look for any possible signals now that the house had been opened to the elements but no, nothing, just odd gabbled snatches of mashed code as former weaponry ALIs spoke the equivalent of rambling last words ...

Wait a minute. The cables were *embedded*?

Errico scooted over and grabbed Li by the arm as she swung a scanner over a nearby railgun position. “Hey could you do me a favour and point that where those cables enter the floor?” She shrugged and turned it downwards, prompting a readout that got his heart racing. There was space beneath the house. There shouldn’t be, not on a house sat right against a module wall, that would mean digging directly into the outer utility lines and anti-impact armour from the wrong side, and even if you didn’t electrocute, drown or gas yourself in the process you’d still potentially make a hole in the boat that’d set every alarm off from there to Amoeba. You’d need to be desperate, uncaring about your own safety, and a skilled technician. Hmm.

Bracing his feet against the floor, Errico grabbed one of the cables and put his back into it, pulling at the plastic-coated connector like an errant weed. As it came up it hauled loose flooring away with it, partially revealing a hole leading downwards. Errico smiled, he was getting the hang of this detecting lark. He quickly checked the ID of his other comrade ... Amith Perera. Also a synth, though interestingly not a fighting model but a research-oriented menton morph. Perera looked like he’d been pulled out of a lab, in fact he was still wearing a lab coat, half-hidden below his combat armour.

“Perera, Li, I think I’ve found something,” he sent over tacnet. “I think they’ve been here a while, and I think we’ve drastically misjudged how dug in they are.” The pair drifted over to join him and seeing the hole, snapped their weapons up. Perera pinged the militia channel.

“Ellen, look.”

Pelloutier’s face popped into HUD. “Ohoh, sneaky. Anyone got a gadget to send in there?” A quick inventory search turned up a Gnat surveillance drone in Li’s pack, which was dispatched into the gap, projecting a realtime tacnet view.

The module’s walls, according to blueprint specs, ran three to four meters thick with utility works, embedded maintenance drones and local server hardware in the gap space and the final meter being a cover of regenerative armour plating — station design had increasingly run to these kinds of heavier specs as tensions between the hypercorps and Locus went on.

This left just enough room for a small dig, it seemed, but little else, and even lights had been eschewed in an effort to shield the tunnel from

discovery. Their little drone was at a stretch to manoeuvre regardless of its enhanced vision and moved forward only slowly, following the tunnel to the edge of the armour plating where it made a sharp turn, running along the plate wall.

Despite care being taken, the drone scraped its rotor casing several times against unseen edges in the darkened tunnel, sending screeching noises onwards before it. Errico felt an edge of panic just looking at the confined space, despite his meds, but was aided by Mal who overlaid skies at the edge of his visor, a visual trickery that helped calm him a little. The Muse was simultaneously working its scan, sending freeze-frames highlighting what appeared to be recent evidence of activity — footprint on a pipe, scuff marks on a flat casing surface.

“Did they really manage this with no-one noticing?” Perera asked, in a half-fascinated, half-concerned tone. “It must have taken them months, longer even, they could have set maintenance alarms off just by cutting the wrong wire.”

Another 20 metres in the tunnel forked, one carrying along the side wall, the other headed back out to the hab interior. A quick search pinpointed a second house at the end of that route, records showing one inhabitant — a fifth DA member? Militia moved in on it from above while the drone carried on down the tunnel. Five metres ... ten metres ...

Fwip ... a millisecond of movement was picked up ahead, just before the feed was cut. “So someone’s in there then” Li remarked, letting go of her scanner and leaving it to float before grabbed her gun from her waist. Ellen pinged a nod from out in the hab. “Yeah. We’re scrolling back through the cam views now but it doesn’t look as though they left out of the second house, it’s largely unshielded, no life signs, we think it was for smuggling in and out without raising interest. Amelie and a squad have just reached the floor running parallel to the tunnel, from a Lidar sweep it looks like it runs on another ten meters or so and then there’s some sort of wider room. It cuts into the armour plate, so I think we know where that house shielding came from at least.”

Errico felt his gut clench, he knew what was coming.

“I want you three to go in there. Clearly this group is up to something and we need to cut down their timeframe.”

He started to get the sweats, it was too enclosed. “I’m not sure I can Ellen, I don’t think I’ll be much good.”

“Just do it Errico, this is life and death. If you have a complaint lodge it after the operation.” Her tone was not one of negotiation. She was in charge by popular acclaim, and he was a tool she needed for a job.

He took a deep breath and grimaced. Right. Okay. Yes. Don't let people down. Got it. “Refer to the bootmaker I suppose.”

She pinged him a definitive sort of thumbs-up and moved on to direct the rest of her reduced force. More heavily armoured in their synthetic bodies, Li was first into the tunnel followed by Perera and lastly a reluctant Errico.

The gnat drone had hardly done the oppressive closeness of it justice, he thought as he dove downwards into darkness. Important-looking pipes and dangerous-looking wires pushed up against his body as he wriggled into the crawspace, snagged his equipment as he took that sharp turn at the armour plate wall.

Despite the combat fear blockers his heart thumped hard in his chest, and his face became slick with sweat as it beaded on his skin with nowhere to fall. He had no room to reach down and grab tissues out of his waist pockets, so he shook his head desperately to keep his eyes and nose clear, perilously close to full-blown panic as he tried to focus on the boots of Perera just ahead of him.

It was so dark as they inched forward that even with overlays and night vision on, it felt like he was wriggling in a mechanical catacomb ... was something behind? *Was* something behind? He couldn't see, couldn't look back, only Perera's boots ahead, was it even Perera? Couldn't bear to focus on Li's tacnet view, just more constricting, binding tunnel ahead, no light to give away their movements.

Errico started to pant and tears formed in his eyes, blurring his vision. He was going to die in this rat warren, this was a disastrous plan, he'd never be free never breathe deep, just stuck in this fucking thing, the mountain was above him, it pressed on his chest, oh fuck fuck fuck ...

Mal attempted to relieve his panic by dropping open spaces into his vision, talking gently in his ear about the blue skies of fields and wide open spaces he'd been in before the Fall, attempting to make the confined tunnel seem as unreal as it could. An endless void was just the other side of the wall, a wide open hab space full of comrades was just metres away, Mal reminded him. He shuddered, shook his head again, tried to concentrate on breathing.

“We’re coming up on the fork.” Li reported, silently. Errico took a deep breath, lightheaded, and waited for the tunnel to widen slightly before dropping a shaky hand to his waist, pulling a pistol around and holding it in front of him as he pulled himself along with his other hand. In the corner of his eye he could see Perera slow and wrestle a laser rifle in front of himself while Li moved beyond and then backed up into the offshoot tunnel, aiming her own weapon down towards where the gnat had cut out. Perera moved forward in her stead, with two guns at his back, carefully trying to maintain a perfect silence. Errico was intensely impressed by the militia pair’s bravery, even as he tried and failed to stop his teeth chattering fearfully with what felt like an incredible percussive noise.

“I can see something ahead, stopping here,” Perera said after a few moments moving further down. Errico called up an overlay to see what the militiaman could see, and tried to remember his breathing, slow the thumping pressure of his heart. Perera settled, focusing in with a telescopic sight ... there was something at the edge of the viewfinder’s capacity ...

A single shot lanced out from his rifle, silent but for a high-pitched whine of the gun immediately winding up for its next shot, and invisible to the unaided eye. They waited quietly, Errico resisting an urge to cough and clear a dry throat as he fought the panic and tension.

“Alright, moving.” Perera pushed himself forward again, slow as a tortoise, his gun held steadily as he manoeuvred with his feet. Nothing fired back, and Errico pulled on behind him, wishing every second that the nightmare would end. Wires, and pipes, hard steel walls, the feet of Perera coasting along, fluid on his eyelashes blurring his view. The thumping pain of his chest rose again, breathe ... breathe ...

“Entrance ahead.” He looked back to Perera’s vision and saw an opening, dim light from a slightly more open space. It offered little respite as the better prospect of having at least a little more room was met by rising tension at what might be beyond.

Perera slowed as he neared the gap revealing a very dimly-lit space, and Errico heard a relieved sigh over comms as it became clear why there’d been no more resistance — he’d hit his target first time, aided by the superior viewfinding of his equipment. Drifting bonelessly in space just past the opening was a figure dressed in a pale smock, some sort of sexless human morph with one eye a smouldering ruin where the laser had done its work. They would never have known what hit them.

The pair pulled forward again, this time more urgently, eager to be done, to get back out into the light. In front of them the tunnel opened into a sort of nest area, with wires and reworked pipes packed tightly into a dense wall of utility lines to make the space needed. To increase the room's size without alerting anyone the supposed DA crew had even managed to dig into the armour wall itself, scooping it out until only a few inches of plate remained between them and the vacuum that yawned between the metal trunks of Spike City. Errico could feel a biting cold pull at him as he floated in with Perera where the lack of insulation allowed heat to leech away. Even so it felt like a blessed relief after the python squeeze of the tunnel, allowing his heartbeat to slow to something like a sensible rate.

The scene before him was ... not what he'd expected. Beyond the corpse three more identically dressed figures could be seen, holding hands, floating compactly in full lotus position and forming a protective semi-circle around a fourth figure who was so pale it seemed they might be some sort of apparition. One of the three, a short, grey-haired and powerfully-built figure, appeared to be Neil Robins, the DA operative Lod had identified as a likely ringleader. A second, he realised with a start, was the identical twin of Vandross and he immediately trained his gun on her. The third, a slim red-headed man, had been caught on camera before the raid but there was precious little data to go on, just another alias heading nowhere.

The figure the trio surrounded and held onto was an enigma. No record of them existed anywhere on the Locus servers, Mal informed him, which should have been impossible. Looking more closely at the details of this unknown body, Errico could find no strong identifying marks of any kind, just closed eyes on a smooth, blank, child-like face that was so symmetrical it might as well have been synthetic. Maybe it was, though he'd rarely seen any synth model venturing that far into the uncanny valley. Oddly perfect. The figure was bald and unsettlingly tall given its thin frame, clad only in some sort of thin, loose linen despite the cold, and seemed to be gently sleeping. On its chest was the pendant.

After a moment of silence taking in the silent meditative scene, Perera interjected: "We're going to need you to come with us."

The tall-child figure's eyes fluttered lightly and its response was felt, rather than heard. The mouth didn't move, only a pressure, more immense

than anything he'd ever felt before, fell across Errico's mind, projecting thoughts where none had existed.

“This iteration is unfinished,”

Errico and Pererra said, together, echoed by the being's three attendants.

“What? What are you saying?” Li, further back in the tunnel, spoke worriedly into their earpieces but they were unable to move. Trapped in this hole in the ground with a fucking seance and a skinny telepathic messiah. Errico's panic swung back with a vengeance and he sent urgent pings to tacnet, wanting the cavalry to just arrive and open the place up. Mal fed rapid data streams through to the militia on position, situation and context.

“Insufficient time, mass. Extricate.”

They all spoke as one.

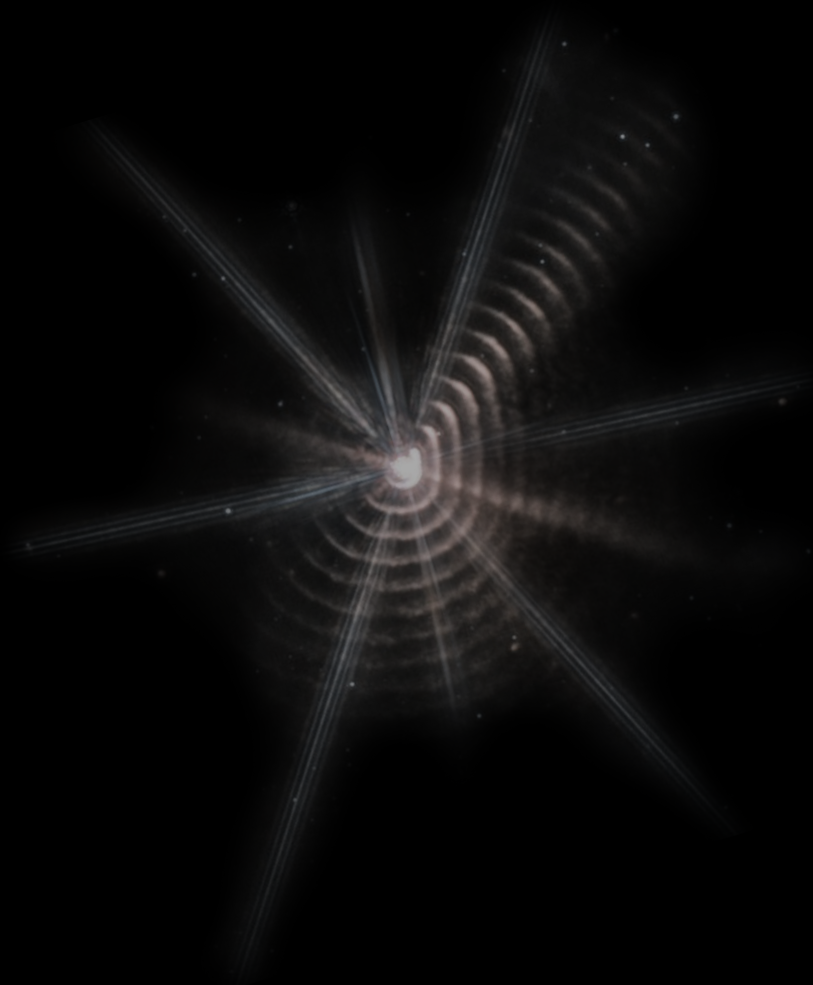
The pressure increased, behind Errico's skull it felt as though his brain matter was being pushed down into itself, but even in his utter terror he could move not an inch, could not scream. His eyes, locked in focus on the body of the tall-child, started to dry from paralysis of his eyelids, the sensations of his flesh began to shut off at the extremities.

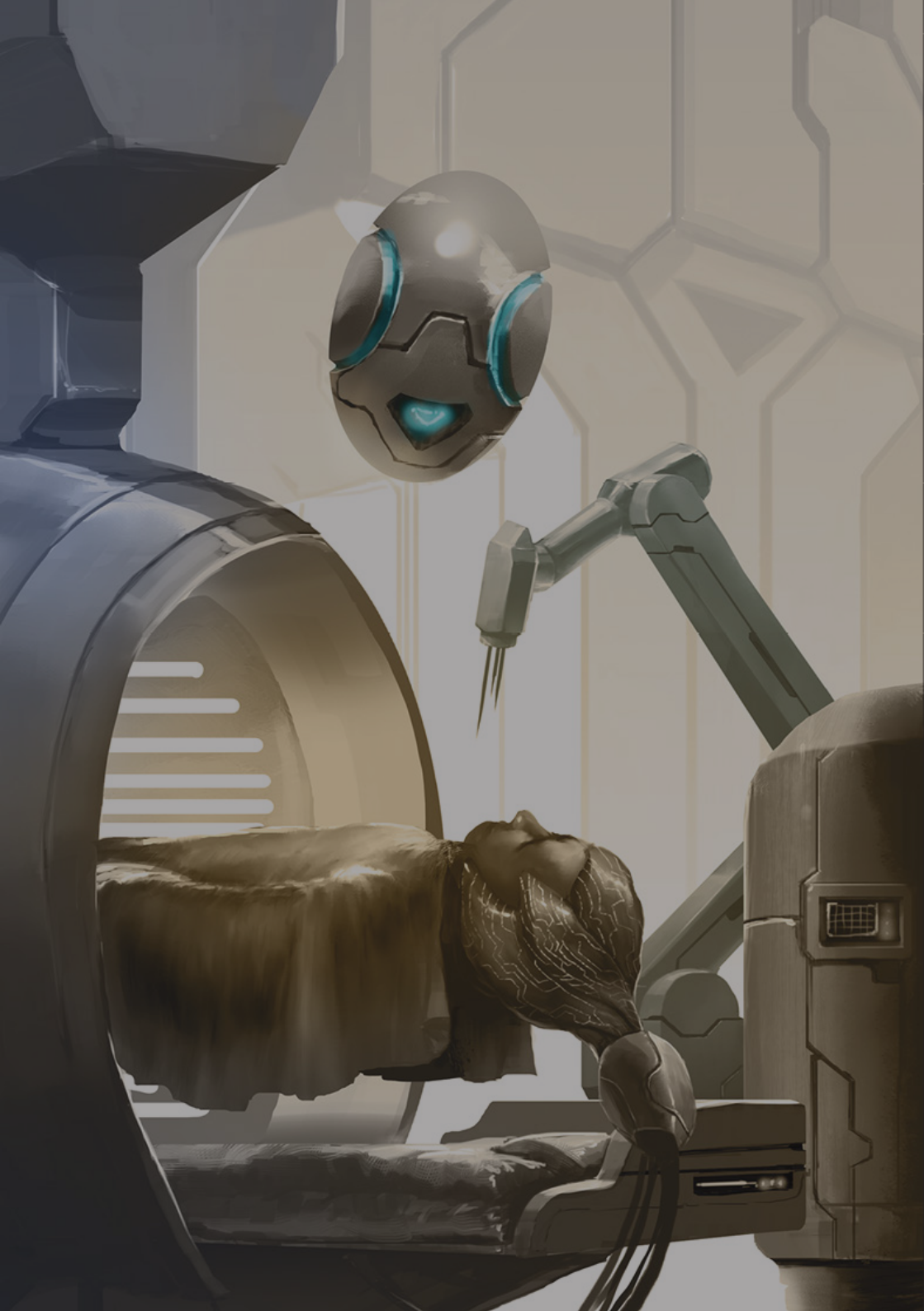
“Perera, Errico, we're lasing in now. Three minutes. Li is on her way.” The voice was distant, a muffled echo from another room, fading as the pressure affected his perception.

His eyesight began to dim as Li announced her arrival with a shot from her rifle that whipped past his ear and drilled itself through the back wall, creating a hole which began to leak air with a shrill whistling noise. She adjusted her aim towards the tall-child.

“Sto...”

“Transmit.”





Later on, We'll Conspire

[Locus, Errico]

He screamed noiselessly into nothing. It went on for a long time.

“Errico.” It was Lod’s voice.

“Errico.” It was Ellen.

In front of him was ... not much. A sort of grey half-tone fading towards darkness. He had a moment of panic and screamed again.

“Errico!” Ellen’s voice came from nowhere, but it shut him up for a moment. Ellen Pelloutier. That’s it. And Lod was an octopus. And he was Errico. And he’d been ...

He started screaming again.

“Okay well we got a bit more out of him that time, chop a little extra off the memory and reboot.”

* * *

Errico opened his eyes. He was back in that bloody recovery room. He glanced over and yep, there was Lod, hanging out on the wall opposite, this time joined by Ellen Pelloutier who sat in a chair under a lamp inside her high-spec combat suit, a steel beast in grey and black, looking for all the world like a cyberpunk noir caricature. Lod spoke first.

“You died. A lot.”

“No shit.”

“You’re lucky, the trauma of your death was such that we nearly gave up on retrieving this version of you. But here you are.”

Errico stared at the ceiling. He didn’t feel terribly lucky. “I remember . . .” he suppressed an urge to scream until his lungs gave out. Pressure, pain, darkness and something else, a horror of a presence. An entity he couldn’t name or envision, something made of shifting, infinitely receding fractal dimensions, doing something that he could put no name or concept to. It *grinned*, like a nasty kid pulling wings off a fly might grin. Like a bigot making a horrible joke and thinking they’d gotten away with it might grin. Some sort of rule being broken, a taboo cracked. But a sense of disappointment too, a brutal viciousness at being denied something. And a vague blur where an answer might be.

“What happened?”

“We’ve agreed to only tell you the bare bones for now, in case the surgery on your memories missed something and you descend back into a mental break.* Errico nodded, the vague hint of a shadow still with him, of a ruined mind dribbling fear. He didn’t need that again.

Ellen spoke up first, in a strangely flat tone. “It was a massacre. They didn’t just have a bunch of weaponry in there, they had explosives planted right the way around the hab. We were busy trying to dig through to you when they went off. Everyone inside was spaced, half of them got torn up by the bombs. Chunks of building flew off everywhere, buried themselves in other modules, hit drones and people on spacewalks. We’ve had a devil of a time getting them all new bodies and fixing up the damage. Ten people died outright, no stack recovery.”

She leaned in and rubbed her face with her hands, a strange artefact for a synth suggesting deep exhaustion. “We lost Perera and Li. To be honest

* Psychosurgery had become a vastly more precise art than the chemical coshes of the 21st century. The ability to fully map minds had allowed for memories to be fixed, traumas removed, obsessions relaxed, phobias blunted. There were some, including Errico, who felt this risked taking something away from the psyche, an element of empathy perhaps. But sometimes, when the traumas were too profound, or too damaging to everyday life, the promise of forgetfulness was a powerful one.

I didn't think you'd make it either, but Lod here is patient beyond words, just kept trying until he got a stable result, took nearly a week. All three of you ... we can't make much sense of the end data we pulled from your stacks but whatever that thing did it just mangled their psyches, nothing left but cognitive static. We had to recover them from backup, they don't remember you."

She glanced over at Lod, who waved an arm gently. "We're not going to show you the scene of your death, suffice to say it was a trauma to watch at a remove, let alone to experience and remember." *The shadow twitched.* "As far as can be told, all three of the beings in front of you, they died. Emphatically died. We don't know why or for what purpose. We don't know what caused you all to speak, or what the words mean.

"Three? Don't you mean four?"

She looked at him, blank-faced*. "No, three. A seeming clone of Vandross, the DA operative known as Neil Robins and a redheaded person. What do you mean, four?"

"What about that weird tall child thing they were protecting? And how do you know who Vandross was?"

Ellen looked over at Lod again. The octopus was next to speak.

"There were only three living beings inside that room other than you and Perera that could be identified. Scans confirmed it, forensics confirmed it, the XR playback of your own memories confirmed it. You've had a serious trauma Errico, that's all."

As Lod spoke, the walls greyed a little and Mal popped up to ask if he would consent to a conversation in virtual reality. Baffled, Errico accepted.

* * *

* More than usual, even.

His vision of the room around him faded to nothingness, though he could still call it up at will. It was replaced wholesale with a brightening scene from a beach that had never been, white sandy shores stretching endless miles into the distance, then up, up into a dark blue line that curved across a huge blue sky. A simulated ringworld, possible, to the best of his knowledge, only in the limitless fantasy space of VR. Mal asked him if he wanted the full experience package, to which he pinged a grateful yes, and at once he could feel a sun's warmth on his skin, hear the sound of waves lapping at the shore, feel sand, just cool enough to stand on, beneath his feet.

He let out a giant sigh of relief. He tried not to use VR, as addiction was common particularly among Fall veterans and the many others in modern society with unfixed traumas to nurse. But as a break from the previous tension and terror that, at least for him, had happened only a few minutes earlier, it was truly welcome.

In front of him, Lod was already sunning himself in a rock pool while Ellen sat under a parasol looking gloomy. The octopus gave him a little wave and continued.

“Sorry Errico, you are quite right there was a fourth figure. To answer your unspoken question, as far as we know it did not die, but it ceased to exist on the station at the very moment when it ended you. Frankly some of us hoped that our fixes to your mind had gotten rid of that bit as it would have been a lot easier for all concerned, but apparently not.”

Errico sighed, maybe he could find some work as an accountant or something, this was too much. “Are you saying, comrade, that you tried to cut a memory out of my head for the sake of convenience? And what do you mean, us?”

Lod nodded. “Yes, that is what I’m saying. And we are only having this conversation because I failed. The existence of that being is something we’re trying to keep under a shell.”

“Wait, did you know it was there all along? Who is ‘we’? Are you keeping information from other Sabot members?”

Ellen cut in: “This isn’t about Sabot. This is more than just anarchists vs corporates. Why do you think we’ve moved here to talk, Errico? Do you know what this is?” Errico shook his head. “This is a high-end secure server. It’s run by a group called Firewall. Which if you search for it on the Mesh should also tell you why that fourth figure has ‘disappeared’ from all the files.”

Errico stared at them both. “Firewall? What, like those weirdo conspiracy obsessives bang on about? From alien-hunter conspiracy blogs? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Well we’re not quite like that,” Ellen replied “but yes we do some alien hunting, and some conspiracies I suppose. The wacky theorists are handy, they obscure as much as illuminate and discourage people who might otherwise probe too deep.

“We were after that ... thing, for a while. At one stage it was one of our agents — Anya. She was always a weird one, but seemed pretty stably human until she disappeared. Not any more it seems. We didn’t realise she, or it, was actually on the station, we were just tracking Neil Robins — another of ours — as he’d been acting oddly. Neil *was* former Direct Action, but they were mostly just using the link for cover. If we’d known the full story we would have sent in our people rather than some half-arsed hacktivist with a body-swap fetish. No offence. And if it weren’t for Lod’s recommendation we wouldn’t have gotten you up and about again after your stack was so fortuitously frazzled. Frankly, if you’d not remembered the incident and stayed stable we wouldn’t have bothered pulling you in here to talk just now either.

“But here you are, and now we’re in this place having to explain ourselves. Because our best option at this point is probably to offer you, and your unexpected capacity to remember monstrosities without totally losing it, a job tracking them down again. Which you can take, and enter a world of running towards terrifying things which are trying to destroy us all, or we can do a bit more pruning and you wake up tomorrow with a sunny disposition and a workaday hobby cracking corporate skulls together. I’d pick the latter, personally, but Lod seems to feel you’d be a useful recruit and the broader organisation agrees.”

She and Lod got up and, dispensing with gravity, floated out towards an island which had appeared a few hundred metres offshore. A sign on it said “Exit”.

“Have a rest, and a think, and when you’re ready give the server a shout with your answer. See you soon comrade.

Errico’s eyes hurt. Or rather, just behind them.

He was getting a migraine.

Are You Listening?

[Unknown]

He was nowhere, everyone. He had _____ no body, but everything *was* his body. No eyes, but for the first time in his _____ could see. His mind was ... not. But was? He had half _____ though maybe less or more? He remembers ... pressure? It's fuzzy.

The tall-child _____ his saviour. Architect of the gestalt. Herald of **Them** _____ is so far beyond comprehension, even from within. Tall-child as bridge, as framer of the words, as, [query] _____ *exsurgent?*

Ahahallool, more or less, more or lesss ... virus, deliverer, uploader, servant. The tall child holds we, for now.

They _____ all are will be have been **They**.

We will tried have try again. With the Mind's Artifact. Yes. More mass, more time, more patience. We are used to patience. We _____ Neil, Vandross, Perera, Li ... Errico.

