

*Digging in the dirt, to find the places we got hurt*

AF3

JULY 9

SUNSET

The tall man in the suit sat on a large hard case with a strap. He hunched forward, his elbows on his knees, his eyes watching the sun disappear behind the horizon, steadily and tirelessly. No mesh surfing, no XPs, no newsfeed, no AR goodies. Just infinite patience. Just perfect focus. It was a meditation. Eventually he issued a sigh, exhaling the Martian atmosphere. He blinked for the first time in about thirty minutes. A freezing wind whipped his tie at his ear.

He wasn't sure what he was waiting for exactly. Or even who. He'd been an hour early. Random GPS node in the middle of the Martian outback. But now it was an hour late.

Okay. Maybe not *infinite* patience.

He reached down into a good-sized box next to him sitting in the red soil and fished out a can.

It made an adorable little simulated pop-hissing noise and released AR elements of confetti and foam head everywhere. "Breathe life," said the sexy voice of an animated boi hanging off the logo on the can. "SODI," he moaned, giggling when the humorless bald figure pressed the pressure nozzle to his scowl and taking a sip, making no other movement, staring into the outback. Eventually he crushed the empty in one hand, gathered it up into a wafer, and set it on the ground...

...where a small monument to the SODI gods had grown 48 beers and another hour later. He blinked.

"Fucking hodack," he muttered. He tried to set one more can on top of the stack. It fell over noisily.

He stood up, steadying himself, snorted, and turned, lifting the case and slinging the strap over his shoulder.

"Hey fock you backwards, man."

The porcelain-skinned man calmly stopped. His tie flapped once in the Martian breeze. His eyes scrutinized the landscape. A man in a long chameleon duster was standing there watching him. He would be utterly descriptionless without his clothes. As it was they were lavish and thick, a padded and pocketed vest over the longcoat bearing glowing insignias of office and rank. Dark glasses, big hat. Cufflinks. The outline of a tie. Fur around the lapel. The wind kicked up and turned him into a flag, showing skinny legs and red chelsea boots. No scalp or facial hair visible. An everyman-nobody.

"You're drunk," said the man in the coat.

The Ultimate shook his head. "Immune."

"You were drinking."

"You were late."

"I been here."

They stared at each other for a while.

"You the Grand X?" said the duster man.

A slight nod. "You DeLaxie?"

"Yup."

Xutuulu Grandwrath blinked patiently behind his sunglasses. "So what the classical fuck, making me wait, then?"

"Part o'the interview."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Grand smirked. "Don't have an office or some shit?"

Lando's clothes shifted in color from the red landscape and turned to shiny gunmetal leather. They shifted shape to form a tuxedo, his tie snapping up into a bow, his lapels squeezing out a little more and relaxing into a velvet. The jacket still touched the ground. Grand's hexachromatic eyes could see that most of this work was being done by holograms. DeLaxie's eyes glowed, but the rest of his face still partially hidden by the scarf, which was the smartvac suit's fashionable interpretation of a respirator.

"Yeah," said Lando, pointing at the horizon Grand had spent the last 3.2 hours staring at. In the distance a small light rolled over the hills. "The House."

Six balloon-shaped wheels. An extendable flight of three stairs. A hiss. The Crasher Truck settled in front of them, a red offroad RV used by gatecrashers, and Grandwrath followed DeLaxie inside. There was a HABITRAIL logo on the side. The interior was furnished diminutively but with full function. AR elements made foggy windows of the walls. Rolando sat down in the passenger seat of the cluttered cockpit and gestured to the manual yoke. Black and red seat covers, a plush steering wheel cozy, several items involving suction cups and two bobbleheads. Clutter, but no trash. The guy must be old.

"Try it, man."

Grandwrath settled into the seat, adjusting it, taking independent control and biting the six wheels into the dust, gliding the house gracefully forward.

"Nice grip, man, real dig." said Rolando.

The Crasher Truck rumbled lazily over the landscape of the Barsoomian outback, the lights of Olympus glowing visibly on the mons. The two sat silently in the dim lights of the cockpit. In either drinkholder sat gravcups of wine. Closed globes with the liquid sloshing gracefully in the low gravity.

"You remember me at all?"

"No." said Grand.

"You know who I am though, right?"

"We died together on Mars in the fall."

Lando picked up his glass and kissed the top, the liquid permeating the graphene shell. "What do you remember?"

Lando got an XP.

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*"Don't make fun of his name," says Captain Cortez. She looks into Grandwrath's eyes, having stopped behind a row of Mars buggies. This is when they were still UNMC.*

*"No?" says Grandwrath's voice.*

*"Line MPs and Expeditionary Combat Cameramen are crazy. They need to be. Lando is both. He kicked a superior officer. In the face. He knew the penalty legally and diplomatically, and paid it without hesitating. Now nobody makes fun of his name. Under the circumstances, the way I see it, he's earned it."*

*"I can handle him," said Grandwrath.*

*"No. Please don't handle him. We need him. No one else can do his job. The guy is in media. He doesn't make a scene, he makes a statement. If I made fun of his name, he'd take a swing at me and take a year in the hole to make an example. But he'd fight you until he was destroyed. With what's going on Earthside I can't have any of that."*

*"...is that in my contract?"*

*She glares at him reproachfully and leads him around the row to the staging area where a Mars Buggy waits, lit up and puttering with simulated AR idling noises.*

*The man in the passenger seat operating the finer adjustments of some manner of bazooka looks up at Grand. He has a helmet and black rectangular glasses.*

*"You that fucking bionazi, man? Nice to meet you." He gestures to the manual yoke. "You know how to make that thing do a going?" then punches his helmet twice, going back to his work.*

*Grand exchanges glances with Cortez, but slips naturally behind the wheel. "Mind if I ask what our mission is?" he calls over the noise of the doors opening onto Amazonis Sulci.*

*"Yeah," said Lando. "But since you did." The buggy lurches forward. Lando pulls his mask over his face. "We're going to watch over some hot zones over the next few days. If whatever's going on Earthside gets here, we're--"*

There was a stretching, and then it was gone. Lando's muse politely reported an error.

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*"You do remember me." Lando's right hand hung from the custom oh-shit handle above the window.*

*"I remember a guy called Lando in a different morph saying 'bionazi'," said Grand. "Then nothing."*

*"I sure was pretty back then," said Rolando. He held on the thought longer than seemed appropriate. "So you wanna join the Rangers."*

*Grandwrath shrugged.*

*"Cool. You like great justice and shit?"*

"I like progression and shit."

"Oh? By what means?"

"Whatever means."

"Good!" said Lando. "It's steady work, good exposure, and once in a while you get to go up against an exsurgent or some kinky shit, you're into that right? All that and plenty of chances to earn...progression...on the side. Cool?" he said, picking up his glass.

The bowls connected making a soft chiming noise in their AR feeds, the graphene making a dull click in real life. Rolando drank. Grandwrath didn't. "What do you remember?" he asked.

"They took most of it" said Lando, setting his glass down. "But apparently I was recording when I went down. I had this contingency to scatter microbeads of my footage to keep it from ever getting captured or destroyed if I was ever...captured or destroyed. Over the last three years I've managed to find a few of them and pieced together our last stand in what is now the Quarantine Zone. Your actions were so...fucking ridiculous, showing it to the Ultimates accelerated your release from cold storage."

"I know."

"But you're wondering why I called you here. You specifically."

"Yeah." They swayed as Grand steered around a smart cat bounding across the trail.

"Lotta reasons. You cuss like I do. We apparently worked together before. And you want to find out what happened to us. You might just have enough venom to do the bad shit we'd need to do."

- The Ultimate watched the steady readouts of the truck's speed, heading and condition impassively. "Say I did."

Lando pounded the dashboard. "YEAH, man!!" He leaned across and punched Grandwrath in the shoulder. "You don't give a fock do ya! Right on! Hah!"

"So?" said Grand. "How?"

"Every chunk I find gives me hints. Who's culpable. Who to point a hyperspectral ghost imager at. We set up to do tremendous damage. Seeing footage of yourself doing the wrong thing clearer than the clearest day is worse than a punch in the face sometimes."

"Can you punch any harder?" said Grand.

Grandwrath got an XP.

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*"You're gonna let me punch you in the face, Ari."*

*"Ex-cuse me?" Ari says, indignant despite his cowering posture and the advancing thug.*

*"Yooou," says Lando, pointing at the man, poking his nose, "are going to let meeee," there is the sensation of poking himself demonstratively on the chest, "punch you in the face," he pokes the man's bloody cheek, "with this hand, right here," he says, presenting a black-gloved fist like it is fascinating, and the first of its kind, advancing on the exec, who falls backwards on the bullet-stippled corpse of a pleasure pod. "You are going to LET me," he*

repeats, "HIT you,--YOU! Mr. Huff! In the, fockING, FACE, or daddy sees all of this," he sweeps a gesture around the bloodbath the hotel room seems to be. An eviscerated Neotenic with a knife sticking out of his eye socket, four pistol-bearing, nude, vigorously punctured ex Pleasure Pods, broken glass and blood, the most visceral imagery, the worst press, nightmares of opulence gone to real darkness. "Or daddy is going to be questioned about your involvement in a certain Summit 29 in Olympus." Ari freezes. "As well as perhaps a guy you codenamed Pyramid Eddie. And the Dainty Lords. And each of the 641 Hikes. And you practicing wound focking on neotenic over the past four years."

Ari bursts out laughing. "They weren't neotenic! You focking bioqueer! They're flats!"

He is interrupted by an enraged shriek and a service boot to the face, cracking suddenly into place like lightning, ragdolling him over a table, the blurring Rolando leaping over it after him, pouncing with his hands wrapped around the expensive morph's silky white throat. It issues the most indelicate choking noises and tries to form some of the more unbecoming expressions of shock that do not normally dignify members of his class. Rolando's thumbs mercilessly ration air. Squeeze. Ratione.

"Where the fock you getting flat kids," demands Rolando.

"Jptr..." gags Ari.

"Jupiter?!"

"We h-have...assets and...franchises in the Jovian Republikkk..."

"How in red hell are you flying kids in from the Jovian Greeks, steady for four goddamn years, you tell me that Ari," DeLaxie murders.

Ari meets his eye. "That's the 'hyper'!" A laugh is cut short in Lando's grip.

"Beg me to hit you," he said. His voice was like ice. "Beg me to hit you. Beg me to hit you."

"Y..you let this go on...for four damn years!"

Railing, crossing, full-motion haymaker punches, drawn all the way back to the shoulder, his other hand holding the man's hair hauling his face against his splattering fist. The Ari's eyes swell shut. His teeth begin to dance. The jackhammering, pistoning, industrial percussion stops suddenly, Lando's gloved fist drawn back, dripping blood and chunks of flesh. "Beg me to strangle you," pants Rolando. Ari gurgles. "What did I tell you," said Rolando, hitting him again, "about making fun," he drew his arm back and extended once more, impacting an adam's apple, "of my focking name..."

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"Shit, you into snuff films?"

"I train animals. He begs to give me money now. My popularity on CivicNet is based entirely on a bunch of evidence I don't reveal."

"Smart."

"Thank you. And I need your help. Because I would like to piss off more people."

"Yeah?"

"Bigger people. More and bigger people. Bigger and more dangerous people. They fucked us and built this hell. I'm going to chew its ass."

"So, who's this prick's dad, and how do I crush him and everything he holds dear?"

"The guy's name is Michael Easterman, and if you wanna get him, you stick with me. Welcome to the Noctis Rangers."

"Welcome to the Rangers? That's it? What about housing?"

"You're drivin' it."

"Orientation?"

"You mean like *official channels*? Fock no, I didn't ask permission to hire you, man. I *leveraged* permission to hire you. I didn't feel like dacking the paperwork."

"I never feel like doing fucking paperwork."

Lando glanced at him and smiled. "Shit, then we'll do this right now. Stop the house."

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"So...what do we do as Rangers?" said Grandwrath.

"We're doin' it." Lando grabbed a piece of snack food from the bowl. They sat on a pair of folding chairs on either side of a camp table, two sets of footprints leading from the Crasher Truck a short distance away. Olympus City lay below them, the sun about to rise over it.

"So what is this giggly shit," said Grand.

"This is our racket."

"CBS?"

"It's an interview. Pay attention." Lando pushed the Soy Chex toward Grand who shook his head, so Rolando turned to the AR window in front of both of them. It was poor quality from old Earth, roundabout the late 20th. "This is a revolutionary douchebag doing an interview with CBS, check out this setup. What do we have? They approach him for an interview, outside the embassy, they bomb him with questions to get him talking. This guy is overwhelmed, but herded toward finally getting what every transhuman wants out of life, someone to fucking listen. That's what everybody wants. And everyone goes to *fucking* pieces when you point a camera at 'em. They get all compliant. So he starts shouting at the camera about Islam or whatever. Now. Cameraman, interviewer, douchebag. Look at this setup, what do you see?"

Grand X steepled his fingers. "Three blinkering assholes."

"Right on. But look at it tactically. As a soldier for years I would instinctively look for places to hide if shots started coming at me, shit I still do it. So imagine like a fight is going to break out between the reporters and that one dude. Who does your instinct say would win? They have him cornered. Surrounded. He stood with his back against the wall, because they *asked*. The interviewer is right there in his bubble. They've kinda got him...surrounded, haven't they?"

"Why would a fight start?"

“Because they’re not really reporters. They’re us.” Rolando picked at one of several other nanofabricated food elements set out on the table, crunching on a FabRetzel. “You asked how we could nail these guys.”

Grand raised an eyebrow and nodded. “Shouldn’t we be on patrol or some other shit though?”

“Will you forget about that? You ever hear someone threaten to reassign you to a remote location by yourself where nothing ever happens? I *applied* to do that. I pulled strings, put plans into motion and swung at kneecaps to keep it and be left alone while I do it. We’re sitting outside a thirty-five kilometer stretch of the Zone where the most nothing happens. I haven’t talked to another ranger in like four weeks. I didn’t even show up at the Christmas party. I roll up and down G36, I sweep it with my scope, I swing around and go back the other way. Eight hours a day. If anything were ever to roll out of there and not be able to pay the toll, I would have something to report. But I never have, ever.” Lando broke a piece off the snack cracker. “Look, you’re the first person I’ve had a real conversation with in like two months. I got my internet, I don’t like anybody, I don’t wanna talk to anybody. I don’t wanna answer *questions*. I got shit to do. So a dead end career to one man becomes a cul-de-sac in the suburbs to another.”

“Nobody, huh?” said Grandwrath.

“NO-boddy,” said Rolando. “Nobody comes here, I live in a house that avoids everybody, I play video games and Magic Cards.”

“And this happy horse shit? Why are we acting like reporters?”

“No matter what we do, what jobs we take, we need a plan that gets you the first hit in a fight make people think my camera is just a camera. This works with our assets.” He handed the imager to Grandwrath.

“What is this thing anyway? Some kind of blackbox?”

“A gauss gun grafted to the scope from hell.”

“Shit, you can see everything through this.”

“Want one?” said Rolando, pushing the snack bowl toward him again. “Comes with your uniform.”

Grand had some. “You play magic?”

Lando laughed. “Get your uniform on.”

“Now?”

“Magic later,” said Lando, taking the imager and standing up, “first, we sow fear. Some guests are about to arrive.”

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*A humanoid focuses in frame. He wears a modified Martian Rangers uniform. Behind him is the Martian outback, with several signs on poles and AR elements in yellow delineating the edge of the Martian Exclusion Zone.*

*“Okay, this... \*ahem\* I’m the Cybrid and this is The Grand X...”*

*The figure in the center of frame nods.*

*"...Versus Traffic. Okay, ready?"*

*The camera begins to jog, backwards and away from Grandwrath, who turns toward a small cloud of dust in the Exclusion Zone, heading out. The camera furtively takes refuge behind a rock, and wobbles as the operator lies down on the ground. We hear him grunt once. "Kay. Right. So, these guys are trying to get out through G36, and they're trying to take the Bat-Out-Of-Hell approach, and we're ready, so here's..." his speech drops to anticipatory panting. Grandwrath changes color to match the landscape, but is easily delineated onscreen. The camera turns and zooms in several hundred times to show us a cycle with two men in Rusters riding it, at very high speed. "See one of 'ems got tumors," mutters the narrator, "the GRM makes some of 'em poor and desperate, so they have to make a living getting...you know, kicked in the face..."*

*The field zooms back out to observe the area, pointing out several landmarks and energy anomalies, one of them very dangerous.*

*"Oh, there's a fockin' blaster patch...wonder if they see it...oops!"*

*There is a distant explosion, the cycle swerves. The narrator chuckles.*

*"Shit, they're gonna have a bad day. Okay, here we go, ready?"*

*We frame Grandwrath again. He calmly waits, and then, raising his arms gracefully, the video goes to slow motion as he leaps effortlessly into the air, drawing his legs up, his form perfect. The cycle rolls past, and his knees clip the heads of the two drivers, whose faces blur from the impact as their bodies slowly begin to ragdoll. Normal speed resumes and the two Stalkers bounce off the ground in a cloud of dust. The camera operator stands.*

*Grandwrath looks from one sprawled Ruster to the other. "Heh. Pull over."*

*The camera operator laughs. "License and registration, you focking sandbacks!"*

#### COMMENTS

*RathBone: OH MY GOD GRAND X IS FOCKING INSANE CYBRID WHERE DID YOU GET THIS GUY*

*MELNIK: X is supposed to be a genehacker, did all his own work on that morph.*

*FOWLER: If only the Stalkers could afford to hire guys like him, amirite?*

*Cybrid: Cannot be confirmed or denied.*

*Corvidae: Dear Moses. The front one's face went right into the back of the other guy's skull. He literally hit the second guy with the first guy.*

*Xenotrope: Then they hit the ground really hard. He literally hit them with Mars.*

*Cardea: Persecuting Zone Stalkers again. Very dig. Making fun of GRM tumors. Also very dig.*

*DEMETREOS: Say it to his face. Maybe you'll be in next week's episode. Would that be more dignified?*

*Cybrid: You'll find his tumors have since disappeared.*



*Red Menace: They're just trying to make a living! You gigabastards!!*

*Pilate: Did the Go Cycle survive?*

*Cybrid: They may have used it to leverage their freedom.*

*Pilate: Did you get them to throw in the blueprint??*

*Cybrid: You'll find his tumors have since disappeared. Cannot be confirmed or denied. Everything is currency. Everything is affordable.*

*CliffordG: FAKE -10*

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AF5  
SEPTEMBER  
DUSK

"Stay in the buggy," said Rolando, climbing out after Grand.

"Why?" said Chopra.

"In case they kill us," said Rolando.

Danforth looked at Grandwrath. "Is he serious?"

Grand didn't answer.

They loped out ahead of the buggy to take up position a few hundred meters from the outside of the cordon. No physical barrier existed in the region. No drones for an hour in either direction. The various surveillance and sensing equipment had dutifully passed the buck to the working men. But Grandwrath suspected that other elements had summoned them here. Now they confronted the shape having left the Quarantine Zone behind it. A nude, pale-gray transhuman, with no apparent gender, walked impassively with its hands raised, in a manner that anywhere else might end in peace. Rolando turned a spotlight and blue laser sight on it.

"Sir? Martian Rangers. Sir?" He called. Lando hated this. Grand fanned out to the left and melded with the night. "Sir, can I ask you to stop for me?"

He expected no answer and got none. He wasn't listening. He was busy switching between various spectra, coming back with more and more inconclusive information. Too smooth, too evenly distributed, too placed, too measured. Too much uncanny valley shit. I'm being lied to. Every instinct told him to obliterate it. But he just needed evidence. He needed to know for sure. Goddammit. Some clue. It could just be a zone stalker in an exotic sensor-masked morph gone fucking crazy from exposure. Or it was probably an exsurgent. It couldn't hide forever. Then he saw. It was shifting. Changing. Inside. Under the skin. The veneer was fabricated. A deception.

"Spot," he muttered.

A blurry shape streaked into the light leaving an obvious shadow and punting the anomaly backwards, bouncing down the mensa. "Kill," said Grand X, straightening his tie and snapping open his railpistol. The creature had long enough to issue an awful howl before its head erupted, split by an expertly-placed rail slug. There was a pause before both men were surprised by a more powerful secondary pressure explosion and the release of several varieties of shrapnel and viscera.

"Oh, *shit*," hissed Lando, observing that shrapnel isn't supposed to be spherical or sprout fractal legs. The Zone had learned a new trick. "Don't let 'em touch you!"

They could hear screaming and shooting behind them as the baseball-sized exsurgent creatures, apparently bots, landed all over the buggy and around the boots of Lando and Grand.

Grandwrath was immediately a roaring dervish of two plasma swords springing to life from his coat, scattering the first few as they skittered, rolled and leapt like fleas to get at them. One landed on Rolando's back, and he braced himself for the reactive armor to happen to them. As soon as the disassembler hit the graphene, the nanites exploded, sending buckyballs scattering, knocking the creature off and the wind out of Rolando. He retched and leapt into the air, trying to focus on keeping the imager steady.

In the tacnet feed, the imager revealed the rollers through the exploding dust and their shifty tricks. Three more shattered from thumping blasts from above, and Rolando hit the ground running toward the buggy to see just how bad it was.

Chopra had been lucky. She'd been eviscerated. They'd latched onto Danforth's face, adhering his hands to them like some sick piece of modern art. He issued a modulated shriek of terror and panic as it began to join him to the mars buggy. The vehicle shuddered Lando kept rolling.

Grand slid to a stop, a grenade appearing in his hand.

"No!" said Lando. "Don't! I have to...I have to do this..."

Grand stared at him.

The infected transhuman opened up secrets never witnessed, pried out by the eye Rolando carried. Patterns and images and readings on various spectra, frequencies and wavelengths. He had no idea what it meant.

But someone would.

Danforth's body tore free of its legs and arms. The buggy started with a sick grinding noise. Then it grew legs.

"Okay," panted DeLaxie, "Now."

Thumping railgun blasts incinerated and destroyed the unfathomable transformation occurring before them.

"Okay," said Lando again. "Okay. We...we sweep the area to make sure none got away, and then...ohh..."

As he shouldered his imager and pointed it to the horizon, it illuminated three, six, nine...several more pale figures. All placidly with their hands up, taking steps the same length. Wandering inexorably out of the zone. Full of lies.

"Shit...maybe they'll nuke this..." Rolando said, shifting from one foot to the other uncertainly, scanning back and forth, spraying the area with tetrahertz waves and lidar beams,

getting very clear readings on how bad a day this was becoming. "Oh fock, are they gonna nuke it?"

"You want to call Direct Action for this?" said Grandwrath.

"They've already seen it!" He slapped the imager. "That's always the goal! We pay 'em e-goddamn-nough! Oh god."

"What now?"

Lando's scope made a bright red-orange beam in Grandwrath's entoptics. When it fell upon a certain spot in the sand, a tiny point of light showed up.

"We need to get it." said Grand.

"I'll take the risk. You cover me."

"I need your scope here," said Grand.

"Fock! I'll cover you. Just stay away from 'em!"

Grandwrath was off running. He leapt and flipped over the first one. It turned on him. When he evaded several more, Lando started shooting. Legs and arms flew off as the cameraman tried to keep them from exploding wholesale, hoping to disable them. It was hard to tell if it was working. They seemed to have their own agenda. As it became clear he was too fast for them to catch, several of the humanoid mimics came together. When they stood together, Lando noticed they all had different faces. For a moment. Then their bodies began to congeal.

It gave him the information he needed. The fabber globes were using technology he was familiar with to mask their true nature. They were constituents in a larger structure. And now they were coalescing. It was then that the guy from DA messaged him back.

"XU?!" Lando shrieked against the wind. "THEY ARE DEFINITELY NUKING THIS!!"

--Just point the damn beam at the bead-- Grand came back.

When the dancing conical radius of Lando's imager roamed back to where the bead was, it stood out in a bright glowing blue. Grandwrath's hand plunged into the dirt and came out with a handful of red sand. He pushed it into his smartvac suit which consumed it just before he was struck and there was an explosion. Something had impacted him and his reactive armor had bitten back, at a violent price as usual. Better have it than not.

"Shit, it's throwin' em!" Lando's sensors observed the mass hurling the spherical fabber bots at Grand, not shifting or reacting in shape, but visible transfers of energy driving the constituents as projectiles. He shot the next one out of the air, split by a helical contrail and a sharp, doppling 'ping' sound. Grant dashed from one side then scrambled back the other, kicking up dirt, trying to get around the mass, but having to dodge a barrage of flying softball-sized projectile-exsurgents. Each one launched at either of them seemed to try a new trick. One sprouted blades on chains, another pair were joined by a monofilament wire. The mass seemed to be forming something. When they looked at it with their eyes, and not through the truth of the scope, the vision of it was several orders more terrible. It took on the appearance of several bodies conjoined in a sick balloon full of spiders. It made a great show of visibly suffering. A macroswarm. It's just a macroswarm, Lando reminded himself. He put a blast through it. It shredded through a line of them and collapsed a little, even though several more wandered toward the mass to join it.

"Goddammit they're trying to fabricate something!"

"Why did you let that ridiculous shit happen to Danforth?"

“What?”

Grand ignited a plasma sword and baseball-batted a fabber sphere. “You just stood there, Deez, what was that?”

Lando laughed madly. “Ohh man do I have bad news to give you later!” He thumped another shot through the mass. The exotic railgun fabricated its own ammunition, graphene drinking straws fired at mach eight, spun at mach three, which expanded it to the size of a Chinese fingertrap. The result was a light, aerodynamic tube-shaped projectile that used less material and had a larger impact zone on a flexible projectile that curved to compensate for firing on the move. He threw open a hatch in the back and fed in a handful of graphene buckyballs.

“Later?” said Grand, pulling another magazine from his suit.

“Yeah *LATER!*” Lando fired again. He had to admit he was learning a lot. The structure shifted and compensated for the loss of its constituents, eating them and resuming their attempts to form what looked like a cube the size of an outbuilding.

“There might not be a later, you unmitigated bastard!”

“I know there isn’t, batlicker! I just got a call from overhead! We have five minutes! We don’t have a vehicle! We have until then to outrun a tac nuke! Whaddya think of that? You compound asshole?!”

“I think there’s a redout nearby,” said Grand X. “I think the House is in it.”

Somewhere a few kilometers away, the House, roaming by itself with instructions to avoid people and stay out of trouble, hid in a red dust storm and mindlessly avoided obstacles. It ground to a stop, kicked up a gout of rusted dirt and peeled back toward the West.

The two men were still divided by the mass. A singing tube intercepted another hurled disassembler and Grand began running. Lando leapt forward, pounding curving and spinning shots into the structure and its attempts to intercept Grand until the two met up and made formation, Grand in front at bat, Lando pitching over his shoulder. Forced to engage them both at once, it was able to consolidate its efforts, barraging the two men in profile, but they covered each other’s escape, firing and volleying some, absorbing the shock of an explosive armor impact other times, achieving all this while sprinting at full speed away from it. They put distance from it, and still it pelted them. Then instead of trying to strike them directly, it lobbed fabber bots in front of them to leap and tear at their legs, and the dance had to change. Golf-clubbing swings, protracted strafing barrages spread out over long gymnastic leaps in the Martian gravity.

“That’s the BEST thing about Mars, man!” shouted Lando, his sanity only just finding its footing, exploding into a maddened euphoria and a new outfit as he sprang off a boulder. “It’s the fucking Matrix every day!”

“Whatever, Neo,” Grandwrath quipped, loading a fresh magazine into his railpistol.

“There’s no place like home, right focker?” Lando shouted back, flipping over a swiping fabber bot and landing just outside the Crasher Truck. A sphere impacted against the side of it with a crack. “Son of a bitch we’re still in range!” He threw the door open and waited for Grandwrath. “Come on, man!” Let ‘em hit! Just go!” He fired several more gauss rods through the oncoming salvo. But two flew through the door of the truck. He couldn’t deal with them now. But he did send a snapshot of this to Grand, who turned and dove headlong toward the open hatch, pistol barking at the possums in the henhouse. One shattered, the other dodged a large

flowering fissure that opened in the cabinet next to it, and then succumbed to the explosive energies of another hand cannon round. Lando slammed the door as Grandwrath deflected off the wall toward the cockpit. The truck lurched. Lando examined the scattered remains of the bots with the scope. While that was probably enlightening to someone, the corrosion they'd done to the walls and floor in the mere moments they'd been there disturbed him. It was compounded by the sounds of more hitting the chassis.

"Keep drivin', man!" he shouted, climbing up to a roof hatch. He emerged, levelling his imager-cannon at the roiling mass disappearing behind them, just over a kilometer off now. The cube was three stories high. A monument to the unknown whims of the exsurgents with the TITANs gone. He hadn't even noticed it was screaming the whole time like some kind of wind through a forest of thorn bushes. What the next stage of this could possibly be, he hoped his readings could tell someone. He cringed and squeezed off a straw at an oncoming sphere which appeared to be flung directly at him with perfect accuracy. They were still in range. Behind him was the sandstorm. With the hyperspectral ghost imager, sandstorms had been their refuge several times. But as they plunged into it, Lando was concussed. Another one had hit him, bouncing off his helmet, and he toppled back inside the House. It was still hitting them. Repeatedly. When he shook it off and climbed back to the hatch, they were hopping all over the structure. The sandstorm would not conceal them as they had hoped. The sandstorm would only serve one purpose. Turning his scope back on the mass as the exsurgent nasties hopped all around him, he waited for just a little more, just a little, yes, 3...2...1...

The top of the cubic shape of the mass began to open. Just as it did a rod of uranium the size of a dildo plummeted from the sky and obliterated the site. The dust storm protected them from the flash. The imager compensated nicely, but could not tune out the whiteout of a tactical nuclear strike. The specimen's ends now secreted, putting an end to Lando's vigil.

When they could at last stop the truck and climb out, they set about swatting and exterminating the little monsters digging at the chassis that had survived the violence and radiation outside.. In the middle of the dust storm they remained, for the rest of the evening. Licking their wounds. Seeing if it was all worth it. Delaying before heading to a debriefing. Letting the world think they were dead for a day.

Editing.

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*NEXT WEEK THE GRAND X FIGHTS THE HUNGRY CORPSE BALLS  
[GRAND WRATH ULTIMATES SWORD PLASMA BALLS MARS TQZ ZONE TITAN  
ZONE(...)]*

*SEE: How Ultimates deal with Zone Badasses!*

*NEW MOVES*

*REAL ULTIMATES TECHNIQUES*

*NO FAKE SHIT*

COMMENTS:

*Semmerling: The whole zone has got to fucking go.*

*Crashburn: Direct Action didn't strain themselves lifting a finger, did they?*

*Pilate: Word is they actually TRIED to snuff these guys, grats on not getting nuked yet again.*

*GrandX: I love the feeling of irradiated nuke aftershock wind on my hair.*

*Econoclast: That thing was trying to form something. Another second and we might have either learned something or all cried out at once and been silenced.*

*CliffordG: FAKE that's not how hyperspectral imagers work (more...)*

---

AF6  
APRIL 2  
DAY

Lando exhaled the vapor from a tube with the logo 'CIGAR-0-TRON.' The truck pulled up. Grand X inserted his hands in his pockets as he stepped off the ramp and onto the red dirt. The truck left.

"What are we doing today?" said Grand X at length.

"We're heading down a dark path, you and I."

"I'm real dig with it."

"Yeah but it's fuckin' risky, man. Too risky."

"So we're goin' legit?"

"Nah, man," said Lando, unslinging a backpack and handing it to Grand. "We're gonna lean on some people and increase our assets."

Through a haze of hallucinogenic narcoalgorithms, 52 Minutes spotted him first. 52 Minutes was riding what had once been a Slitheroid, and might still be under the glowing graffiti. Across from him was Apoapsis, in what was still mostly a Synthtaur. Apoapsis was clear and focused. But terribly apathetic. 52 Minutes and Apoapsis hated one another. Vitriol hated 52 Minutes and Apoapsis, and so they were often assigned to watch the door together. The approaching figure was bundled up in green and sporting glowing Martian Rangers credentials.

"Hey, can I ask you fucking clinkers a few questions?"

"DeLaxie," said 52 Minutes.

"Vitriol," said DeLaxie.

"Nobody sees Vitriol," said 52 Minutes, swaying in a serpentine stagger.

"You got a warrant?" buzzed the Synthtaur. It stood aside the bunker door in the deserted commercial quarter. The place was neglected. The Synthtaur, towering on its hind legs, was opposite a menacing and deranged looking slitheroid covered in glowing graffiti tags. It had an odd number of limbs and an uneven distribution of eyes on its head.

"You got a lease?" said the approaching vacsuited figure, stalking toward the door, his boots clicking audibly on the tile, duster dragging. Apoapsis stopped him with one of four massive hands on his chest.

"You got an eviction notice?" said Apoapsis.

"What do you even do for the Empusae? Write jokes?"

"You like jokes?" grated 52 Minutes. "What's red and bad for your teeth? A brick. Get the compound fock out of here."

Lando looked at him. "Knock-knock."

"Who's there?" 52 Minutes asked threateningly.

"Interrupting sniper."

Vitriol scuttled out of the nanofabber suite of her workshop. The door opened. 52 Minutes collapsed inside and crashed on the floor, a smoking circular burn in his torso region seeming to keep his attention. Apoapsis stood awkwardly over 52 Minutes with three of his hands up.

"There's someone here to see you," he growled. He pointed with a blasted stump at the door.

DeLaxie and a man Vitriol didn't recognize stepped over 52 Minutes and walked in, each holding shoulder-mounted cannons. Vitriol clicked at them. "Sure, just come on in. How can I placate you?" said the Novacrab.

Lando had a smoking plasma burn on his outfit. He pointed the bazooka at various things. A laser grid appeared over them. There was an audible 'beep' and the word ILLEGAL scribed itself in red light over whatever he pointed it at.

"So I'm Inspector DeLaxie and this is Inspector Grandwrath, and first of all, this is illegal, this is illegal, this substance is controlled, you got a license for this?" sang Lando.

"I said what do you want!" clattered Vitriol.

"I'm asking the fucking questions! You're with those fucking Anarchs?" said Lando.

Grand eyed Apoapsis menacingly. Outside there was a rattling sound of 52 Minutes trying to right himself.

"They're called 'autonomists,' and yes, officer, I do work for them I traveled with them on The Stars Our D--"

"Well we want to buy some of your free shit."

"Buy it?" chittered Vitriol. Her voice was composed of inhuman scratching and popping noises. "Maybe you want to make an appointment next time?"

"Maybe you want to take my calls?" said Lando. "I want a tank. And a blueprint."

"A tank?"

"One of your fucking dillhole heavies shot me," said Lando, pointing at where the smoking gouge had been in his armor, now glossed over by a gear vest. "A vat. One of yours."

"Four hundred thousand." screeched Vitriol politely.

"Knock-knock," said Lando.  
"Who's there?" Vitriol creaked sweetly.  
"Grand X," Said Lando.

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*NEXT WEEK: HOW TO SNIPE LIKE AN ULTIMATE*  
*SEE: The Grand X shoot badass EXHUMANS IN THE FOCKING FACE*  
*ALSO: How to SMASH A NOVACRAB*  
*GUN CAM ULTIMATES EXHUMAN SNIPE GRAND WRATH NOVACRAB[...]*

COMMENTS:

*Corvidae: Ultimates 1, Exhumans 0*

*Cheezbot: When's the last time these guys fought something normal? Not complaining just seeing if anyone remembers.*

*UnclHiro: Word is Grand X is going back to pit fights soon.*

GrandXFan0110110101: Did he seriously drive his fist through the nova crabs shell?

GrandX: yeah I did

GrandXFan0110110101: Oh My Glob he responded to me. Where did you learn to do that?

GrandX: Joe's CrabShack

---

The Crasher Truck normally slept six. It could get by just fine sleeping just five. The healing tank was horizontal, and replaced one of the drawer beds. Lando reasoned there was basically no reason not to sleep in this.

"You can operate it from the inside, right?"

"Yes," said Grandwrath. "But I'm not. Get in."

"You get in it, crotchbat!" said Lando.

"I know you're a fucking pod just get in it," said Grandwrath. "We need to get you some real lungs."

The energy changed quickly. "I am not a fucking pod!"

"You're a goddamn meatborg, don't be such a hodack."

Lando cringed. "I'm not a pod. I'm a Cybrid. Look, fuck you, how'd you know about that?"

"You wear big smartclothes to cover up your generic-ass morph, you wear dark glasses to cover up the NeoCapital logo on your retinas, and whenever anyone figures you out, you kick their ass and say it's because they made fun of your name. And I'm a genehacker, I took a



goddamn blood sample while you were sleeping, you're a goddamn pod and don't fock with me."

"I'm a *Cybrid*! Pods don't have biobrains!" Lando threw a plastic drink canister at Grandwrath. "You focker! You can't tell anybody about any of that shit! Do I have to take a shot at *you* now?"

Grandwrath stood. Rolando shot up too. He wasn't a short figure, but he had to crane his neck to meet the eye of the Ultimate standing over him.

"You looking forward to that?" said Grandwrath.

"Fock no, man! But I gotta do it! Because if anybody finds out, I won't be Rolando DeLaxie the guy nobody focks with! I'll be *The Pod*, you understand me?!"

Grandwrath nodded slowly. "I understand you."

Lando smiled.

"Pod," said Grandwrath.

---

Grandwrath knelt down and peered into the healing vat. The way it was oriented it looked more like a fishtank. "How you doing in there?"

Lando opened one swollen eye, smiled weakly and gave a thumbs up. His teeth were starting to come in again. He immediately returned to floating listlessly. --How'd I do?--

Grand patted the glass and stood up, returning to the driver's seat of the house where he monitored their course and the healing tank's work at the same time. --You punch like a teacup poodle.--

--Fock you, G-dub-- There was a long silence. --I couldn't let 'em own me.--

--You're talking about GRM.--

--These fockers we're trying to ruin, they pioneered that shit. They put a toolbooth between transhumans and their own genetics just like the church put a tariff on people's spirituality. I like cybernetic parts. They don't have focking GRM. When I died the first time, I was like, fock it. After losing the first one, after you take that leap, doesn't matter what body replaces it, the first one is gone. So I went for machine pieces. If you don't mind being mostly cybernetic, a Cybrid's a great morph. I fought an Ultimate in it once.--

--How'd that go for you?--

--I'll be back. These nanites are crunchy.--

--Stop chewing 'em,-- sent Grandwrath.

--Tell me how I did.--

--Great for a pod-- Grand sent. He heard Lando punch the inside of the tank.

---

Everyone should do this, thought Lando. He'd gotten used to sleeping in the Fish Tank. The drawer opened, the hatch popped and he climbed out, dripping nanite-juice on the rug. Without his smart clothes, he was obviously highly cybernetic. There were several seams on his skin. A hexagonal NCC logo was replaced by "G36" on his shoulder. He blinked at the back of Grand's head from the cushy driver's seat, already patrolling Grid 36, fuzzy dice swinging above his ear. The House was spartan as ever, littered with chachkis and odd decals. There'd been an odd tension since the Pod/Cybrid thing, maybe before that. With the secret out he'd taken to walking around naked more as a show of obnoxious disregard. He went over to the tiny washroom and closed the door.

Grandwrath waited. He turned the music off.

The door to the head slammed. There was a long silence. Through the interior SPIMes, Grandwrath saw Lando standing and glaring at the back of Grand's head. Attached to Lando's own head was a new feature.

"You shouldn't sleep in so long... Dickhead." chuckled Grandwrath

Lando said nothing, didn't even flinch. The new penis on his head was beginning to slowly stand up as his face turned red. There was a pop from a squeezed fist.

"You're right, Cybrids are real customizable." Grand said.

"This is what Ultimates think is funny?" said Lando icily.

"Fock you, man, I'm an artist."

"You wanna fockin' fight me again, man?"

"Now that I can kick you in two dicks?"

Land snatched up one of Grandwrath's handguns off the table, a flat, featureless rectangle that snapped open like a switchblade into a handle and muzzle.

"Oh, calm down," said Grand. "I can remove it, easy."

"Yeah?" said Lando, pointing the railgun at Grand, who was still driving.

"Yeah. All you gotta do is tell me why you did that to Danforth and Chopra."

Alerts sounded as the atmosphere in the cabin changed, and a napkin was sucked out into the desert. Grand glanced over his shoulder at Rolando, who had thrown the door open to the egress. What the hell was he doing this time? He hit the E-brake and stood up to find DeLaxie standing outside, still naked, with the hand cannon to the side of his head. It was angled in a different way than a suicidal man might do.

Grand raised an eyebrow. He considered saying something. But part of him wanted to see this thing play out.

There was a loud thump and a scratching noise as a projectile screamed into the exosphere, and a severed lump of flesh tumbled lazily through the air, scattering blood and testicle-viscera before it bounced, twice, to a heap on the plain under the sun. DeLaxie was already kneeling, pounding the ground, wrenching and crushing the soil in his hands, his cybernetic lungs surrendered wholly to the infinite job of enraged shrieking. Grandwrath just watched Lando scratch at the Martian dirt, crossed his arms as DeLaxie drooled, retched, howled and hissed through his teeth. He did this for over thirty minutes, until the shock of having blown a fresh set of feeling genitals off his body, whose first ever sensation was being severed, passed. Finally his bloody, sweaty, bespat hand closed around the crude scalpel he'd used to castrate his own skull and he stood shakily. He folded the handgun back up and shoved it

against Grandwrath's chest, who accepted it as Lando closed the door, bled over to the dinette and sat down.

"You," he retched, pointing at Grandwrath, "work for me," he said, poking himself. "I said," he panted, "I would tell you. Later. And I will tell you. Later."

Grandwrath grinned, nodding. "Okay."

Lando opened the drawer tank again and climbed inside and said nothing else. He did not go to work that day.

---

The spaceport moved around them. The circular promenade around the beanstalk ribbon circulated with mostly biomorphs and attendant bots. A woman stared up at DeLaxie, doe-eyed, his black lenses giving nothing away. Her hands clasped his shoulders. His stayed in his pockets. His coat circulated in an unseen breeze and whipped softly at her ankles.

"You came to see me off?" Her tone was diplomatically gentle.

He shrugged. He knew what was going on.

"That's sweet, I didn't expect to see you here."

He sighed. "Yeah, well. Cops. You know. Workin'."

"What happened to your forehead?"

He pulled his hat down. "Some...some dickhead."

"Oh. I hadn't heard anything from you in a while, so I..."

He shook his head. "We weren't working out anyway. Where you goin'?"

"Um. Venus."

"Oh, good."

"Yeah. Yeah. I got a job. There's this aerostat."

"I heard a lot of chicks were from Venus from this one guy, back inna day," said Lando, managing a small smile.

She laughed, squeezing his shoulder a little. "What happened to you? I was all ready to get to know the Mystery Man in the coat and then you were gone."

"Oh," he shrugged again. "Got busy."

"Yeah, it's hard on Mars," she said, cocking her head and nodding sympathetically.

"Anyway, the car is here, so...hey, if you're ever on Venus..."

"Heh. Yeah."

She hugged him. He patted her lower back with one hand. And then she went.

He turned his back on the lines of boarders, queuing up as the doors to the space elevator car opened, and strode as authoritatively as he could through the crowd toward a place he could get something to eat. His clothes changed to a tuxedo. Then a tracksuit. Then a cheongsam.

But it didn't work.

Grandwrath sat at the handlebars of the newly-assembled GoCycle. It hummed patiently. He leaned back and forth, swaying the domed bike from side to side, testing the gyros on it, finding they responded well. Lando had emerged from the truck with his imager under his arm. More than a bit of him was missing. His attitude. His tactical awareness. He was going to pieces. Grand's eyes stayed forward as Lando climbed into the back, and sat facing behind, calibrating his imager.

"Go," he said, not looking up. His voice was like soda with no bubbles in it. Stale, unpleasant to consume.

"Hang on," said Grandwrath. "Can I get admin?"

Lando granted him admin rights to their channel without thinking. He expected their partnership to pan out any day now. He could have it. He'd hire a new best friend.

"Thanks," said Grand. "New episode's up."

Grand never edited or posted his own vids before. Lando got ready to be insulted. The GoCycle rolled toward the North.

### ***EXCLUSIVE!!! GRAND X FIGHTS THE CYBRID!!!***

*Interior, The House, Day. Grand X faces a selfie cam. His arms are crossed. The name GRAND X appears in a title card briefly before he begins poking aggressively at the camera like a WWF wrestler and shouting.*

*"I'm a fucking Ultimate, you know what! I look all over the place to fight the best, to be the best! Sometimes I beat up genetrash! But fighting babies all the time isn't very dig is it?! So this week, I fought THE CYBRID."*

*We see several cuts of a brutal figure in various long trench coats, ruthlessly flinging punches into helpless aristocrats, kicking above his head, fighting several men his own size, and one of him looking into the camera with a look of derangement.*

*"This asshole claims he knows Kung-Fu-Do and threatens to karate people! I have no idea what the tumbling fock it really is, but it involves hate, kicking, drugs and hate! Sometimes he doesn't even need the drugs!! He pretends to be a stupid asshole, so people fight him, so he can kick ass 255% of the time! This is when he's not shooting invisible people through walls! How tough is this mother fucker? He shot off his own DICK!"*

*We observe the procedure through Grand X's eyes, the exterior cameras of the Bus of seeing The Cybrid shoot his spare feature off and collapse screaming insanely.*

*"You ever draw a dick on your roommate's head? I GREW a dick on my boss's head! What does this mean monsoon do? He shoots it off of his damn self! I had to dampen the pain thresh on the XP of my fight with this madman because you non-ultimates, you just couldn't take it! Are you ready to fight The Cybrid?!"*

*We transition to just before the fight. Entoptic numbers countdown 3, 2, we're looking through Grand Xs eyes down at Lando, experiencing the poise of an Ultimate getting ready to fight.*

*1...*

*"I understand you," says Grand X's voice. "Pod."*

Freeze frame here. "This is what I had to do to get this icedick to fight me," narrates Grand X. "When he sees somethin' big, he's just gotta be bigger."

The beginning is a blur. The ingress/egress hatch slides open. The two spin in each other's grip for a moment before Rolando is thrown out into the truck lot under the oxygen tent, kicking up a cloud of red dust and scattering rusters. The perspective cuts to one of the onlookers, then another, capturing various angles of The Cybrid flipping back to his feet as Grand X strides down the ramp and takes up stance opposite him. The two begin to tear at each other...

...Ten minutes later a crowd has formed, but they aren't cheering anymore. The Cybrid is bleeding out of several cuts on his face. Time and again he flips to his feet. Then hauls himself. Then staggers. Each time The Cybrid rises, he flings himself upon the Grand X, but is sooner or later flung back across the empty parking space and into the side of the crusher truck.

...twenty minutes of savaging one another later, Grandwrath, panting, reaches down and grabs The Cybrid's ankle and drags his mangled morph back up the ramp to the House. The onlookers, over a hundred by now, slowly begin to cheer.

"He tried. He didn't even manage it, but goddamn, I hope he never tries again!"

GRAND X WINS

COMMENTS:

Yaoguai: I would never fuck with either of these cats.

Mudd: Seconded.

CalomineNanites: Who IS The Cybrid?!

Beater/Biter: He runs this channel, I think he works for Grand X irl. They're neo-isolates who live somewhere in the outback.

CliffordG: FAKE

MELNIK: Shut the fuck up, Galby.

Chigger: I tried to run that with the safes off. I literally detached my left arm and hit myself with it three times it hurt so badly. And you won.

GrandX: I swear the guy eats pain.

"You kick like a fucking bastard," said Grandwrath.

Lando said nothing. The cycle stopped near a black solar tent and about seven or eight synths watching the Zone. Lando immediately advanced on them. Grandwrath held the camera. Upon seeing the rangers the gangers turned on them.

"IDs," said Lando, plunging immediately into their midst, utterly heedless of their threatening stance. "Now."

"Look copperrr," said a voxording of Rocky the cartoon gangster from the Ranger's left. Lando turned and kicked the synth in the face. It backflipped in the Martian gravity and collapsed the black tent.

"You guys are the Red Rollers and I wanna know what you stupid hodacks are doing in my yard. Nobody, huh?"

"Chigger?" said Grandwrath, zooming in.

"Oh shet!" said a case morph, pointing frantically, stepping back, tripping over a rock, toppling, still pointing. "It's *him!* It's The Grand X!!" The cheap case morph was covered in "art" including the word CHIGGER inscribed on its forehead, backwards, except for the R. "And that means...*you're the Cybrid!!*"

The others immediately dropped aggro. Lando strode to stand over the upturned case.

"The Cybrid's a Rangerrr?!" said a voice from inside the deflated tent.

"Grand X fought him! The Cybrid fractured three of his ribs!!"

X laughed. "Chigs here is a big fan o' me. Got a fan blog called 'Ten Grand.'"

Rolando bent over him. "Is that so?"

"Oh it hurt so goddamn bad!" the case wailed, clutching his head. "I got this widget that overrides the pain thresh to get the real shit! Beezus Balls! You kick like a fucking bastard!"

Lando glanced behind him. Grandwrath was grinning, the blobject still resting on his shoulder, rolling. "What in red hell are you trash mobs doing out here?" Lando demanded.

"Relax, man, we'll tell you," said a purple-colored synth, putting a pair of tentacles up in place of hands. "We love your shet, is that your boss, is that the Grand X?" Rolando stood up. The synth stepped back. "We're waitin' for Tamlin, man! But he ain't come out. Not for two weeks."

"Get your clank asses out of here, Grid 36 is restricted. It's zoned for my house. And you." He turned on Chigger. "Tell me one thing I don't know about Grand X."

"What?! Don't you live with the guy? He's standing right there!"

"Yeah. But he never talks about himself. Indulge me."

Chigger looked timidly at X, who glowered down at him. The way Chigger cringed he believed the diminutive miscreant knew what the Result Gun was and what it did. Rolando towered over him.

At last, Chigger gathered himself. "Grand X came by his name in the early years of the Western Blockade when his contract first became lucrative. He declared he'd kill anybody for ten grand. For ten grand, they'd get the Grand X."

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*RED ROLLERS FIGHT THE CYBRID AND GRAND X AND LIVE  
SUPER MARS KICK ACTION REAL SHIT SEE THE RED ROLLERS FACE REAL BAD  
TERABASTARDS NO FAKE PLAY NOT EVERYONE HAS THE CHOP TO FIGHT THE REAL  
SHIT*

*By: RedRollersOfficial*

**COMMENTS:**

*Grand X: I didn't realize getting kicked across the face of Mars was considered a fight*

*Econoclast: You know you've hit the big time if you get kicked over a campsite by these guys. Did you at least have fun flying through the air like that, Chigger?*

*Chigger: Guy got 58 meters, real dig, not even mad.*

*Ginjerrr: These guys arrrrre the compound gigabasterrrrrds. To run into them at all is a big deal, and we survived. You want to roll in real meatspace you run with the Red Rollerrrrrrrs.*

*SmashStevens: GODDAMN YOU FOUGHT THE CYBRID YOU GUYS ARE VF*

*Chigger: :D :D :D*

*Ginger: ROLLERRRRRRRRRRRRR*

*MELNIK: If I fight these two lunatics and take a dive, can I get these rep gains?*

*Grand X: Only if you can beat Chigger's distance record.*

---

AF 8

DECEMBER 25

Fen Eastermann moved as unobtrusively as he could through the atrium. The convention buzzed around him as he headed for the door, and came out on the promenade. Safe.

"Sir?" Shit. Fen lowered his head and sidled sideways toward the elevators. "Sir? Can I get you to comment? Sir? Mister Eastermann?"

It was too late. Two men appeared out of the crowd of stupid people, where he could swear they didn't exist before. Long coats. Press passes. fock. One of them was already right next to him, holding a microphone under his chin, backing him against the wall, and looking into a large camcorder the size of a panzerfaust which was now flashing a laser grid and balance light on him. "Sir? Sir?" said the cameraman. "Can I get you to comment sir? Can you fill us in on the proceedings? How has your proposal been received by the Synth alliance?"

The man in the Exalt morph cleared his throat quickly, trying to avoid the two men, but bumping backwards into a wall. "I haven't heard their response but I know what it's going to be. I'll put Direct Action security on them, and I'll put it on you too, this is an extremely inappropriate time to ask me questions!"

"Is there ever a time, Mr. Eastermann, where you won't simply threaten to have someone removed by security forces you don't actually control?"

"Now listen to me," said Eastermann, raising his voice and one finger, "you can just get aAAWW" he shuddered as the interviewer shoved the microphone into Eastermann's mouth. There was an electrical buzzing noise. He fell into Grandwrath's arms.

"What an asshole," said DeLaxie, still rolling camera. "Let's get 'im outta here."

They dragged him toward the door. Their outfits changed to sport emblems matching those of the Eastermann's political corporate affiliation. Two reporters carrying an unconscious politician drew attention from the Corporate Christmas Convention attendees, but seemed to be one of those things no one has a social operation for. "Excuse me, excuse me," chanted the cameraman politely. "Mr. Eastermann is just under the weather, we're just going to take him outside." So they let him. No one wanted to get involved. Not with a camera rolling. The two carried the third out the double doors and into the hall toward the restroom, carefully ignoring the approaching "hey! Hey!!" noises angrily pursuing them.

Michael Eastermann burst into the bathroom backed by two bodyguards in security pods. They came upon the two reporters washing their hands. Michael pointed at them. "Hey! Where the hell do you two idiots think you're taking my son?"

One lit up and took a large camcorder off his back. "Sir? Sir? Michael Eastermann? Your son is known for partying a little to hard, isn't he? Sir?"

"No!"

"He's in the stall behind us throwing up and defecating himself, we didn't want an incident, would you care to comment?"

"Shut up! I demand that gyAAAA" \*Gzzzzzt,\* Michael danced awkwardly in place as Grandwrath lunged forward and grabbed his face as his smart clothes sent an electric shock through Eastermann's skull, and the hyperelite collapsed.

In one movement, the two security pods advanced on Grand but were split-kicked as he shot into the air, one blasting a stall door off its hinges as he came to a stop in the toilet, on top of the executed morph of Fen. He screamed. The other was thrown into a tile wall, bouncing into a kick from DeLaxie, pinballing him against the sinks. His head hit the faucet with an unsettling clank, then slumped into the basin as the spigot turned on, automatically drenching his head. Blood ran down the drain. The pod hung there.

"Demand this you fucking queer," said Rolando. "Grab the old shat."

"Whoa, man, that's derogatory," said Xu, prodding the catatonic Michael one more time, causing him to yelp and scrabble at the floor.

"I'm *swearing*. I'm *trying* to be offensive! Get their guns."

"YWhat about the kid?"

"What *about* the kid?"

"Fen. Dead Fen."

"Luring his dad into the fucking bathroom is the one use he's been to anyone in his life."

"His morph," said Grand. "Does he need it?"

Roland opened his mouth to insult Grandwrath out of juvenile habit, then he closed it again, considering it. Then he decided on, "fock no. Heh. fock no! Ha ha ha! Grab his ass too! Put him in the sack! Ha ha ha ha!!" He turned and saw the remaining security pod in a heap in the bathroom stall, its AI trying to re-center itself. Grandwrath absentmindedly shot it through the head.



"Now you see that? *That* is a pod," said Lando.  
"Whatever you say pod" quipped Grandwrath

---

Michael shook awake. His head lolled from side to side for a moment, unsecured as the rest of him was to the chair by fiber tape. "Oof--what--?!"

The Crasher Truck rolled obnoxiously over the most bumpy and jagged rocks it safely could, pitching Michael back and forth violently.

"Hey!" he managed. "Hey!! Oof!!"

Rolando was sitting in front of him. Behind Rolando was Grandwrath sitting at the table. Strapped to that table was Fen's morph.

"What'd you do to him?"

"Used 'im, same as you. You bought him a nice-ass morph though, man. My friend here's going through his genetic wallet. Bare times and all that shit. Even for you, am I right?"

Grandwrath was cutting open the shirtless torso of the prissy dead-eyed Exalt with a diamondium scalpel, having already taken several blood samples for mapping in the computer. Now he just wanted to have a feel around. He reached in barehanded. There was a squish.

"Jesus!"

"Jesus Jones?"

"fock! Stop this!"

"KALIMAAAAAAH" roared Grand, pounding on the table and ripping the Exalt morph's heart free.

"Oh god! What the fock!!" Michael's feet scrabbled uselessly at the carpet.

DeLaxie slapped Easternmann. "Didn't your assholes lead the industry in GRM? fock you man, focus. His problems are over. Maybe we'll give you his grape, you can restore him and he'll be the same asshole. Be a dick and we maybe play hacky-stack instead, get me?"

Grand looked over and grinned, showing Fen's detached cortical stack sitting prettily between his teeth before disappearing back into his mouth like a jawbreaker.

Michael shook his head in horror. "Fine! My god, what--what do you want?! Jesus christ!" The man struggled, his eyes locked on the Ultimate disassembling his son.

"Want? I wanna tear *your* guts out. But I have business, you know? Where's Tamlin?"

"Oh, *FOCK*." Michael struggled violently.

Rolando slapped him again. "O'Fock? Is that a town in old Ireland or what?!"

"OW! Damn it! fock you!" The man's silver-fox Sylph morph was starting to show some signs of rough handling, mostly his hair, flyaways streaking out awkwardly in several directions

"Tamlin."

"I'm not telling you anything about Taml-"

Gand lurched suddenly, flicking his wrist. There was an awful wet slapping-sloshing noise as something disgusting, red and bloody clapped Michael in the face and bounced to the deck of the cabin, staining the rug, undulating and slurping around as the truck went through

gullies and over moguls.

“AAH! OH GOD!!”

“Was that his liver?” asked Rolando.

“Uh, it washen’t labild,” slurred Grand through the marble in his mouth.

“F-f...f-fuh..!” Eastermann stammered.

DeLaxie glanced behind him. “Yeah, that’s his liver. Look, he’s got more organs dude. So do you.” He turned behind him. “Hand me that scalpel.”

“The DEARTH!!”

“The what?”

Michael shook some of the viscera out of his hair, spitting. “The fucking Dearth! It’s called the Dearth, it’s in the Zone!”

“Tamlin’s hiding in the fucking zone? Tamlin’s not hiding in the fucking zone.”

“TAMLIN is HIDING in the FOCKING!! ZONE!!” shouted Michael. He caught his breath, spitting some more. “It’s the only place I couldn’t get at ‘im,” he sputtered.

Grandwrath raised a disgusting blob of flesh, preparing to fling this at the hostage, but he hesitated, examined it greedily and put it in a beaker instead, patting the lid and setting it aside. He picked up a marker and began to carefully doodle the word DINNER on it. With his tongue sticking out he carefully drew the R backwards.

“Well I’m going to check on that,” said Lando.

Michael laughed. “You are? Oh, you *are*? How about that! You! OW! fock!!” Something slapped him the other way across the cheek, a lung this time.

“We got *you*. We’re gonna get him. You’re not nearly as awesome as you were just after The Fall. And just before the Qtube Scandal. I wonder what happened.”

“Ohh,” hissed Michael through his teeth, “that was *you*?”

“If Tamlin’s not where you said he is, I’m going to get really inventive. Right after I release the footage of Code Teal.”

The messy hyperelite suddenly froze.

“Yeah,” said Rolando, nodding menacingly. “Qtube was just the beginning. I don’t have time to keep you in a playpen. You profited off the desperate. I understand that. The desperate are profitable. Now, you’re desperate, and I’m profiting. If I call you, pick up.”

DeLaxie stood up and threw open the sliding door to the vehicle behind Michael. “These are yours,” he said, taking a set of mesh inserts out of his jacket, grabbing Eastermann’s hair with one hand and jamming them back into a slot behind Eastermann’s ear.

“OW, what are you--!!” Grand turned his head spat, Fen’s cortical stack bouncing out the door, and then Lando booted Michael him goodbye, propelling him backwards out of the truck to tumble two meters to the Martian surface. The carpet was flung out after him.

“HEEEY! Goddammit!” he called after them. He looked down at the chair, and fiber tape wrapped around him. He tugged. “Dammit, get me Rubrick! Goddammit pick up Rubrick! Your muse is fired! Get to my cords right now!”

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## THE FOLLOWING MORNING

"Sir? Sir?" said the bodyguard, stepping out of the hovercar, three others sweeping the area and brandishing microwave agonizers.

"Oh goddammit, I don't ever want to hear anyone say that to me again," said Michael Eastermann. He had a bloody, crusted black marble clutched in his hand, but was still attached to the chair.

"Who did this to you, sir?"

"SOME FOCKING--uh...I...I did. Did this."

"You...?"

"I LIKE IT! Just...just get me out of here!"

"Right away, Mr. Eastermann."

---

*HERE COMES THE ROOSTER: AWESOME SPLIT KICK BY GRAND WRATH  
NEW MOVES REAL TECHNIQUES NO FAKE SHIT ULTIMATES ULTIMATES  
ULTIMATE*

*COMMENTS:*

*CliffordG: FAKE*

*MELNIK: Aren't you a fucking Eastermann, Gilby?*

*Cybrid: Is he?*

*Grand X: Coords or get out*

---

"Tonight you see everything," said Rolando. He was sitting at the table. The house rumbled along. Under Xutuulu's guidance it remained mostly level on the Northern hills and plains. This was so easy and his concentration so attuned he was able to do this while getting his hour of sleep a night.

The other man sighed, reclined in the driver's seat, the wheel turning itself. "I seen your genitals and your genome, man." Grand was still able to carry on his half of the conversation despite being mostly in alpha-wave sleep. He'd explained once how he was able to do this to Rolando. Grandwrath's training regimen, the things he did while Rolando was smoking or doing drugs or feeding otherwise feeding his universal addiction. He trained martial arts and marksmanship in simulspace, read, studied, sometimes Lando just watched him.

"Not really," said Lando. "We're both dank impenetrable hominids, man. I'm surrounded by smartclothes and bullshit, and you keep your mouth shut. But tonight you learn me, and you learn you, and you learn why we're doing this. All this. You can see me nekkid later. We're gonna talk to Chopra and Danforth."

Grand was awake now. That night came flooding back. Danforth getting eaten alive. Lando letting it happen so he could record it. Why?

"They were screwing us," said Grand.

"Yeup," said Rolando.

"Someone's tailing us."

Lando looked up, climbed up to the cupola, and looked out at the landscape. Then he looked down. There they were, in a Mars buggy, literally bumper-to-bumper with the House, Chopra and Danforth glaring up at them.

"Yeup," said Rolando.

The truck stopped, hissing some greenhouse gasses. It waited until two vacsuits emerged from the buggy like prairie dogs and crossed as if under fire to the ramp of the truck. The truck began rolling immediately after they embarked. The buggy followed.

AR elements and smart surfaces made the long and cramped interior look like a train car with dark woods whipping by the windows. Distant lights occasionally appeared as analogs to Olympus City. Two men, a man and a taller man, in gray trench coats, dark rectangular sunglasses and brim hats sat at a table of four wine glasses. The table was nestled into various other articles of dual-purpose and alterable furnishings but they were all made up to look like various parts of a private railcar. The two rusters detached their helmets. Taking this in for a moment they watched the car and the two men for a moment before taking their gloves off and sitting down. They didn't touch the wine. The less-tall man did.

The two sat over an AR game of cards. Each held a hand of seven, hovering above their fingers. Cards with pictures were strewn around the table. Animated creatures stood on top of them. Rolando put a card on the table, then turned it sideways, then drew a card. "How are we this evening?" he said. Grand X considered his turn carefully.

"Born focked," said Chopra.

Tallman chuckled. "I know. I know all about that."

"Yeah?" said Danforth. "You down with the B?"

"They piss off people I hate. I wanna know who else you work for."

"What do you mean?" said Chopra.

"You know who I am, man?"

"We know who you are," said Chopra.

"I'm an insanely corrupt Noctis Ranger. I'm called Inspector DeLaxie on CivicNet, and I'm known as The Cybrid on Guanxi. I've been an MP, forensic investigator, sensor engineer, a shrink, and an extortionist. I designed a sensor that cannot be defeated, and I see--"

"We know who you are," repeated Chopra.

"You're the fockin' *Cybrid?!'*" blurted Danforth. Chopra looked across at Danforth and slapped his shoulder. He didn't even feel it. "He works for Grand X!!"

"You guys are wrong about who works for who. He works for me, and neither of us work for you. And I wanna know who you fockers work for. Skinbats like you are always showing up to give me little tablets of shit, steer us in the right way, toward getting Tamlin for you. That's what happened to us, Grand, that's what I couldn't tell you. That's what all this was about."

Goddammit! I'm sorry, okay?! I didn't know for sure they weren't Nine Lives or some shit! Goddammit! You fuckers. I had to lie to my only friend for six goddamn years. I got Grand out of storage, but who got me out? No matter how unexpendable I tried to be, I knew I'd never get re-instanced after the Fall. But I was. You think I'd never ask why? Where I was getting leads to extort fucking oligarchs? I could have done without the goddamn memory wipe. It really affected me. Rolando DeLaxie has turned into a real gigabastard, man. A nasty son of a bitch. Did you get 'em to make me more violent? It worked, now I'm pissed off and suspicious enough to figure out who's pulling my strings and why. I been diggin' on you guys for six years. Oh, I know why. I died in the Fall. I collected critical data. I continue to collect critical data. I leverage guys putting a deadlock on GRM. And I scanned a guy as he was turning into an exsurgent and being fused to a Mars Buggy in the middle of nowhere outside the cordon as well as several new types of exsurgents, creatures and conditions no one's ever brought laboratory or intelligence grade sensor equipment to bear on."

"What in the hell are you talking about right now?" said Chopra.

"You want me to find Tamlin," said Lando, "I don't do shit for free and I wanna know who's going to be signing my checks from now on."

Danforth snorted. "Ever hear of Firewall?"

"What?"

"You guys are Firewall?" said Grandwrath.

"What?!" repeated Lando more stridently. But the two Rusters were ignoring him now.

"What if we were," said Chopra.

"You guys are Firewall," said Xutuulu again. "You? You guys are fucking trivs. I thought you were supposed to be tough or some shit, but you skags are point five."

"What the compound terafock is the Firewall?" Lando demanded. He received a file, which pacified him momentarily.

Grandwrath discarded a card, ending his turn and leaving Rolando to hold up the game again. "You guys have any luck getting somebody into the Ultimates?"

Chopra snorted. "Any luck getting an Ultimate onto the Eye?"

Grandwrath glanced across at Lando. "Not 'til today. You want us to find Tamlin, you cut us in. Both of us. And I don't--*look, man!*" Grandwrath pounded the table. Lando looked up defensively. "You can't pull this 1/1 counter dogshit when you think I'm not fucking lookin'! You wanna play with your goddamn paleolithic-ass sliver deck, you don't get to tell me about no dinglebastard house rules! Put that Soul Net back in your hand, put the Manakin back in the discard pile, don't think I don't see you playin' witme! How many cards you have in your hand, man?! That's what I thought! Discard!" Lando sneered as he undid his rule fudges. Grand went on. "This Eurocorp motherfucker had the goddamn temerity to ask me to play land drop. I don't play land drop, and I don't work for free just because the B-tard camp thinks GRM is an X-threat," said Grandwrath.

"It is!" shouted Chopra, slapping her wine glass off the table. It bounced off the wall and spilled nothing. "You get Tamlin and then we'll talk."

"Wrong!" yelled DeLaxie, throwing his own wine glass, cards scattering everywhere, settling back in their places as if by Magic. "If Firewall wants Tamlin, the price is fucking higher! Tamlin Eastermann is god's own key to the genetic playbook! You don't think I know what the

Genetospline is? You think I don't know what that means for Firewall? You don't think they'll nuke him from orbit to protect it? Going after him is suicide! New morphs! Account on the eye, now! Quantum farcaster! 24 hours! Get me?!"

The house stopped and the door opened. The two Firewall agents put their helmets back on. "Okay, DeLaxie, here's your orders then. There's a train leaving Olympus City in two hours," said Danforth. "Get under it."

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AF9  
FALL DAY

The two men drifted into Noctis Backup Delta. A Hyperbright met them there. He wore a long white lab coat with a storm flap. His hair grew in strands as thick as pencils, serving as cooling baffles for his brain. Most of the lights in the facility were off. No one in their right mind scheduled a backup on a day like today. It took a favor. And dealing with a somewhat unknown quantity in one Dr. Julian Prowse.

"What's the occasion?" he said, in a decidedly unprofessional pose and demeanor, sitting in a chair, resting one foot on a waiting ego bridge, biting the end of a narcodongle.

"We're celebrating our anniversary of dying in The Fall by getting nuked again," said Rolando.

"Now why the fuck you gotta tell everyone our life story, man?" said Grand X.

"Fuck you man, I'm an artist," said DeLaxie.

"Shet," spat Xutuulu, crossing his arms and settling into the seat.

Dr. Prowse snorted and looked over some entoptics. "Get in."

"I don't like these things," muttered Lando. He sounded like a small child.

"Yeah," sighed Prowse. "Backups are when the scary shit happens."

Lando looked from the ego bridge to Prowse and back. Finally he climbed onto it.

He stared defiantly at the ceiling as the computer read his damn mind. His arms were crossed over his chest same as Grandwrath's were but not for the same reason. He was a toddler forced to get a haircut or pose for a photograph. Or an old person required to use the newfangled. *Don't close your eyes. Don't close your eyes. That's when it changes. Don't close your eyes. Goddamn. First time I woke up I had a panic attack. Just watch the ceiling, keep the ceiling ri--*

"Goddamn!" he shouted, throwing his hands up defensively.

Xutuulu opened his eyes and saw the white room. They weren't really his eyes. It wasn't really a white room. Suicide missions are never easy. He sighed out of habit. "How long?" There was no answer. A door appeared in front of him. Not this crap. He put his feet on the floor and opened the heavy wood door on a dim conference room. Some of the figures surrounding the table, he recognized. Danforth. Chopra. Chigger. Vitriol. Prowse. Others he didn't. He sat at the vacant head of the table. They all watched. He folded his hands./

Lando slapped about his face for a moment, blinking at the white room. He immediately fixated on the wood door. "fock you with missiles!" he yelled, throwing the door open. "And fock yeaaaaa--" he fell, the door opening on an unfinished structure in varying states of third-world disrepair. He smashed through a plastic tarp and a drop ceiling onto a rotting conference table. It hurt so very badly. As he clawed back toward clarity, several figures began to drop through the ceiling, crash through the plaster walls. Danforth erupted out of the north wall holding a sledge hammer. Chopra surfed a ceiling tile into the floor from above, smashing it. Chigger's simulmorph was his case morph, three times bigger and holding an industrial wrench. Dr. Prowse swept in through the front door like a normal person. Vitriol burst up through the floor like a kaiju.

At the head of the table was Dr. Prowse, hands also folded, staring fixedly at Xutuulu Grandwrath. He waved his hands slightly and several pieces of paper flitted into existence, glowing blue, and settling in order on the table. Photos and documentation. Prowse folded his hands again.

"Tell us about Rolando DeLaxie."

"No."

Rolando immediately leapt upon what he thought was the weak link, but Prowse caught him and threw him back across the room through the back wall, landing in front of Danforth, who sledged him. Lando kicked him off, and kicked up out of the way as one of Vitriol's many claws burst up through the floor to grab him, instead getting clocked by Chopra coming the other way. Prowse floated through the hole DeLaxie had made, glowing with the power of admin.

"Tell us about Grand X."

"Sell you down, man!"

Prowse sighed. "Danny and Chops may not have been clear when they turned down your offer."

"They were clear," said Grandwrath.

"Then where the fock you cockweasels think you're going?" said Prowse, kicking DeLaxie in the ribs, who was in a headlock between Vitriol's pincers. Lando in turn repeatedly kicked Vitriol's soft joints. The brawl had made its way around the building, down two floors, then up one.

"Gah! Nonnayer business! Fockyou! You can't do shit! I bet you I'm a fork! You shoulda cut me back!"

A bottle shattered off Lando's head. Chopra hurled various objects from across the divide between two floors. He boot-shoved off a support beam to rotate the fight so the bottles and bricks would hit Vitriol, but directed himself into a haymaker from Prowse.

"You compromised a Firewall operation with your little shakedown, meatborg," Vitriol hissed in his ear.

"I was *executing* a Firewall operation! You assgrommit," Lando grunted.

"I guess that's true," said Dr. Prowse, grabbing a chair and breaking it on Rolando. Vitriol threw him.

"It would appear," said Prowse calmly, "that you and your...friend...backed up intending to head into The Dearth. I assume you were intent on carrying out certain actions against one Tamlin Eastermann."

"You do assume that," said Grandwrath, also calm.

"Tell me about The Cybrid," said Prowse.

"No," said Grandwrath.

"Why would you go that close to the Legion/Minion Void without our support or any of your demands met?"

"You think you can stop us?" Lando threw a handful of cement dust into Danforth's eyes and kicked him off the scaffolding, which collapsed shortly thereafter as Chigger Kool-Aided through the wall and the metal support beams. Rolando tried to negotiate the landing but the floor his feet found couldn't bear the impact as dictated by the server's realism rules and collapsed. Prowse landed on top of him at the bottom of a cascade of planks and rebar, punching. "Why the fuck would you even go, Deez?! Did you think we would just let you in if you impressed us?!"

"You know why. That mission was always our mission. They did this to us and Mars in the fall. With or without you, we're going to get Tamlin. You want him, but in the end we want him more." said Grandwrath. Prowse raised an eyebrow.

"Tell us about Rolando."

"No."

"How would you describe your relationship with the rest of the Ultimates?"

"Technical."

"Why did you go to the Dearth?"

"We were gonna screw you!" retched Lando, thumping into a wall, ducking a punch that cracked the concrete, getting hit by a thrown crowbar. They were closing in on him. "We're going to kill Tamlin! We leaned on Ari and Fen! His backups are gone! We're going to destroy the Genetospline™! It's too late to stop us! Torture me if you're fucking gonna! So fucking die!! That fucker killed us! He killed us so we couldn't compete and we're going to pop him like a zit!"

"What the simplex fuck is a zit?" said Chigger, cracking Rolando with a salvaged copper pipe. It broke. "You kicked me in the face, D-Bag! You picked on the case. How dig is that?"

"Why the hell did you wanna be on the show then?!" Rolando yowled, covering his head, smashing through a drywall panel with his shoulder.

Chigger chased him. "Because you were about to blow my fucking op! I was assigned to keep those guys ready to eat Tamlin alive if he came out of Grid 36! They wouldn't shut up about your channel!"

"If you'd paid the toll like everyone else you coulda stayed!" Lando shouted, grabbing a cinderblock and hurling it to burst on Chigger's chassis.



"Do you intend to screw us?" said Dr. Prowse.

"Ask me about Rolando DeLaxie."

"No. Now tell me about Rolando DeLaxie."

"No."

"Why do you protect him like that?"

"Guy's my landlord." said Grandwrath. Faces around the room soured. "My job description is pretty vague. But I think some of it involves protecting him while he ruins a bunch of shit."

"You're gonna do *what*?" The fight had stopped. Prowse had Lando's lapel, the rest of the man hanging limply, Prowse with his fist drawn back for another punch. Though breathing was turned off, they all panted out of habit.

"How many times have you run this?" spluttered Lando.

"Look," said Xutuulu. "Anything you wanna know about us, you'll learn on our channel. Anything you wanna know about Lando, you ask him yourself. He'll tell you. The guy never lies with his mouth."

"He lies some other way?"

"Any other way. His kicks lie. His facial expressions lie. His wardrobe lies. He can have 'em. He always did way more damage with the truth."

"Well we dug up your contract here. It describes your job title as 'house chauffeur,' and your duties include 'driving the house.'"

Grandwrath laughed. "He wrote that, huh? What an ass!"

"Tell us about your friend The Grand X," said Prowse.

Lando rolled for a moment before answering. "He's an outlier. He would be a Rajput, but he died in The Fall on Mars, not Earth. During the collapse I got footage of him taking on Fenrir tanks with a plasma sword and a Gauss M2. He was born with the name Grandwrath, but the footage earned him the title The Grand Wrath among Ultimates, and instead of honors they give him his space. He's a Ranger. He lives in my truck hab as a neo-isolate. He stars on my channel as the Grand X. These are all matters of public record. And the rest is a grand old *fffock you*," he spit, simulblood spraying from his lips.

Prowse sat down on an overturned tool cabinet. He shook his head. "I'll never goddamn get it," he said. He looked down reproachfully at Lando. "Aren't you gonna ask me what?"

"Fock no," slurred Lando.

"We have the Genetospline," said Prowse.

"Dogshit," said Lando.

"*You* gave it to us," said Prowse, shaking his head.

Lando opened his eyes and stared up at Prowse for a moment. "We already did it."

Prowse nodded. "Happy Fall Day. You got nuked from orbit. Everything went as planned. Except you sent us the Genetospline over QE Comm. We didn't give you one. You said you

were going to fuck us. Your friend says you never lie. We're trying to find out why you changed your mind."

Lando sighed. "I don't know about all that 'never lying.' I guess I hadn't decided. I brought the QE because I didn't have one in The Fall. To get Tamlin was always our mission. No one else was going to avenge us."

"The message you sent said something different. It said what an awful, violent corrupt bastard you are now, but were demonstrating that you remembered how to be a decent human being, and dared 'any of you compound tetrabastards' to say the same."

"I had a friend who taught me to always be better than my enemy."

"You really wanna be in Firewall pretty bad for a guy who considers us your enemy."

"I am in Firewall, I've been digging in the dirt doing your goddamn dirty work for seven goddamn years, I want the goddamn credit for it. Retroactively. You've seen the damage I can do. If I went through with it it's because I wanted to visibly prove you needed me as an ally. Even if I am a demanding bastard."

"Hey why don't you just calm down, there, Syndicate Wars? We intercepted your backup and your stack was nuked."

"Which is why I have to be ornery, spit, swear and kick like a fucking bastard because if you think for a second I'll turn into a fucking crotchbat this was all for nothing. I swung at a bigger bag than I anticipated and had to swing it hard because there was no goin' back. I had to show you I was a real bastard. Every step of the way. You hear me you bastards?" he picked his head up, calling to the other assailants, all perched on various watches, observing him and Prowse.

Prowse nodded. "I originally moved to recruit you. That's why this is on the line here. I stuck my neck out."

"Oh, thanks," groaned DeLaxie.

"You sure did bring the delta-V, though. This is the first solid key to GRM treatment. We've never had access to shit like this before. I mean, that's a solid result."

"So what in red hell happens now?"

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AF 10  
JULY  
PRESENT DAY

*Framed is a man resembling Grand X is driving a Mars buggy, viewed from the passenger seat.*

*"This is my new coworker," says the man behind the camera. "Say hi to him, he has to deal with me now. How old are you, man?"*

*"Twenty-two," mutters the driver.*

*"Jesus. Anyway this is Thursday, J--" There is a visual contortion toward the sides of frame and an awful buzzing noise before it refocuses and the camera swings out toward a city that hasn't existed for over nine years. "--rd and we're heading for a trouble spot in the Balustrade, someone attacked the trains again and it's tied to military personnel, as it gets more dangerous I've been afforded more protection in the form of this brick shithouse here. What's your name, man?"*

*There is a clicking and a cut to a burning military installation. Grand X runs toward it, the camera bounding after him. "--even echo four two has been completely wiped out, mesh coverage is gone, no one's responding, last we heard before it went dark was...what the hell is that thing?" The frame zooms in on a helicopter bot with sinister looking talons which modern vernacular recognizes as headhunter drones. The image is clear enough to see transhuman blood dripping off several of its components. The image begins to shake as the two begin to fire upon it. Sparks issue forth as it begins to dive, and is suddenly backed by two more.*

*Another jump cut leads to a shaky sequence which culminates in a fight between Lando, Grand X and a Fenrir tank, with Lando drawing its fire until the Ultimate can land on top of it with a plasma sword. They eventually take refuge behind the wreck of the vehicle, but the entire landscape is swept visibly in chaos below them. There is a grainy and broken-up section where communications with any authority are attempted fruitlessly. The feed clears when the imager begins to sweep and scan the sky, and detects and zooms in on something extremely distant. "fock me, man!" shouts Lando's voice. "What?!" Grand X yells back. The camera begins to shake. Soon we're looking at Rolando. "You hold the camera! You hold it! Okay?" He steps back, out of cover, holding his arms out. "This is me! This is Rolando DeLaxie! I'm...I'm 89 years old. This is me. I lived until I was bent, I got the first biomod therapies, I dragged my ass through the dark ages just long enough to land my ass in one of the first healing vats, I got a stack and everything, but this, this is me. I've never re-sleeved. I played it cool, played it careful, I was a good boy, I worked hard, and instead of dying I kept working, and it all went to shit and I knew this was going to happen, and now Earth is gone, but I got away, I got away here, I worked hard enough to get here and it turned out to be shit, and I got away, and then it came here, the fall came here, and I got away again, and these PMC assholes handed us right back to these TITAN assholes because it'll give them an excuse to nuke our factory. They're gonna nuke us. The satellite is almost here and they're gonna drop the hammer on the rollers comin' this way. Grand, you believe in this immortality shit? Yeah? Well I don't. Rolando DeLaxie, if you call yourself that and you're listening to this, you aren't me, Rolando DeLaxie is dead. You're a copy. You're a fucking Last Tuesdayism. This isn't your fault. You earned it. You earned it and they took it. You want to use my name, you want to use my emotions and have my favorite food and shit, you also get the anger for what they took. You get these people, you tear them apart until they're down to their constituent parts, until there's nothing left of you to dispose of, or you don't get to call yourself any extension of me. You got it? Gimme that thing." The camera shakes and changes hands again. "What about you, man? You don't like to talk and you've been holding back, but this is it, man. They have to bomb the Rollers. But if the Rollers never reach the 22nd parallel in time, they have to drop it here, they have one choice. You get me, man? If we hold them here, they don't get what they stole. You wanna make your last statement, man?" Grand nods and ignites his plasma blade. The camera turns to face the TITAN war machines rolling up*

*the hill, various vehicles of differing offensive capabilities. "Show me! Come on!" Grand leaps ahead, flying into the air, spinning, shooting, deflecting, landing on a groundcar and impaling and breaking its back, then leaping directly behind another drawing the fire of another Fenris tank, causing one to obliterate the other. Lando's cannon thumps into various 'focking trash mobs!' that try to surround Grand as his trajectory takes him between different elements of cover that are moving at various speeds, picking the least armed ones to hide behind as he advances on the tank, which Lando pounds with slugs to no visible effect. Bullets spang and spark everywhere, and there is a near-perpetual cloud of red dust kicked up, which the imager penetrates. "Yeah! YEAH!" Screams Rolando. Parts of the tank turn red. "Right there!!" They button the sensor arrays of the Fenris hulk as they make their final approach, haphazardly orchestrating a bait-and-switch as Lando presents himself and Grand X leaps on top of it and begins hacking at its guns. Shots scream past the camera as perfect aim is disrupted by wild smashing energy blows until the cannon no longer works. Grand leaps into the air as several projectiles chase him, some clipping his armor, the crossfire causing two HEAP missiles from other tanks to incinerate the one under him. A quick sweep of the field before diving back into cover reveals the direction of the whole advance has changed to turn on the two men. The camera turns back on Grand, still in midair, hanging vulnerably as he tries to land. "Goddammit man," says Lando sadly. "I told you never to jump straight up." Unable to do anything but wait for gravity, the first grenade hits Grand, catapulting him one way across the landscape. Another hits him from the other direction. "Goddammit. Oh shit," Lando hisses as Grand is hit by another blast, launching him back. We zoom in to see he is blackened but still alive, turning the latest blast into a spin. Angled right toward an offending TITAN machine, roaring enraged, the Ultimate bats the final oncoming projectile out of the air, disintegrating it in a swipe and a green flash, and diving blade-down onto the offending Doberman IFV. An explosion seems to obliterate them both. After a long pause and another quick and very grim re-assessment of the situation by the camera sweeping the field, it dares to look one more time at the black and red cloud of smoke and dust. After an infinitely long time, a figure stumbles out of it. Suddenly the camera casts skyward and audio cuts out. A streaking object hurls toward the surface. The imager picks it out very clearly. With great fervor and at great risk, Rolando appears to begin firing into the sky, dodging away from oncoming fire, getting hit, firing skyward, running, firing at the moons, a nearby mons, a building. This behavior breaks some component of the imager's gaussgun function as each shot loses more and more of the stream's image quality. What's left ends suddenly in a white washout.*

Lando opened his eyes. He sat on a hardcase. There was a case of SODI beer by his hideous vacboots, which he hated. He leaned down, punched open the box, grabbed out a canister, closed his eyes and prepared to watch the footage again. But no. There it was, pretty much right on time. Soon it came into visual, a small shape weaving through the outback.

--I thought you were gonna make me wait like three hours,-- said DeLaxie as The House rolled closer.

--What kind of romping fucktrope would do something like that?-- said Grandwrath.

--Oh, a real rompin' hodack,-- said Rolando, throwing the beer case into the hard case, which was otherwise empty, and lifted this onto the boarding stairs.

The door closed behind DeLaxie and he could take off the helmet of the used, ill-fit vacsuit. The legs had fiber tape wrapped around them to ease the difference out. He sighed. Xutuulu was lodged in the operator's chair, the various decals and bobbleheads competed for attention, home sweet weird-ass home.

"Pizza." said Lando.

"Guns," said Grand. "Then pizza."

Lando rolled his eyes.

"You want a hydrogen beer?" said Rolando.

"I want guns," said Grandwrath.

Lando sighed reproachfully. "Two, please." When Lando turned around again, he was face-to-face with a grinning Neopig. Muddd laughed like a farm animal. It was a hillbilly "hyuk-hyuk-hyuk" followed by a wheeze that came out as a "weeeee-!"

"Howdy, Muddd," said Lando, handing a beer to Grandwrath just in case he needed a hand free to guard his head. He'd busted the guy before.

"Petal, mister?" twanged Muddd, smiling with two huge tusks and holding a white droplet-shaped crystal between two fingers. "Reeeeel good, free samples today only!"

Rolando looked down at his badge in disbelief, then at Grandwrath's. "You crazy tryin'a sell me this shit in public?"

"I think you'll find them quite to yer likin'! If ya look reeeeeeeel close, you can see their tantalizing effects!" He held one up.

Lando peered at it suspiciously.

The restrictions regarding petals were something of 'blue laws' in Olympus City. It was unseemly, however, to hold a petal up to a normally blind eye. But this one had an eye inscribed on it. And so Lando quickly snatched it. "Right! Right. I'm gonna confiscate two of these, don't let me catch you aroun' here again or whatever."

"Sounds best fer ever'body! See ya roun', mister! Mars for Mars!"

Lando and Grandwrath both eyed Muddd with disdain for different reasons, mixed with disturbed surprise that he'd been Firewall the whole time they'd known him. "We gotta get back to the House," said Lando.

"Guns," said Grandwrath.

"Fuck, man!"

"What do we do with 'em?" said Grandwrath. He looked up. Lando was sitting across the House from him, looking back. A crunching noise was issuing from his mouth. Grand grimaced a little and put the petal between his teeth.

"What do you see?" said Grandwrath.

"A red dust storm, what do you see?"

"Same. And a meeting invite."

"Yeah."

And it carried them up in the air. They both took the opportunity to gracefully freefall and their avatars cartwheeled and pirouetted until they landed on the Martian plain next to one other man, surrounded by pits full of writhing tentacles.

“Oh man, I’ve seen enough hentai--” began Rolando. “Who’s this guy?” Proxy Weed interrupted them.

*Fourteen synths died simultaneously on the fourteenth, at 14:14 Earth Time. This happened two hours ago. Investigate and determine possible X-threat and report.*

The voice of Proxy Weed had faded. Lando and Grandwrath turned to look at the newcomer, who leaned back a little, defensively.

“So who the fuck are you?” said Rolando.

“I am Firewall,” said the newcomer.

“Good answer. Meet us at **Chachkis**,” said Lando, sending him a Reddot of a family fabbermat in the lattice district.

“Okay. Gimme an hour,” said the stranger. His avatar was in shadow, even in direct light. He stepped carefully away from a writhing meatflower growing out of a crack.

Lando poked his head out of The House, looking around the lot outside the diner. A face emerged from a Mars Buggy, decorated to look like a theme park ride for some reason, gussied up to look more Mars Buggy-ish. Lando snorted and let the guy up the ramp.

“Hey, have some pizza,” said Rolando as the Firewall agent came in. “If you use the AR elements it tastes like the real shit.”

The man took a piece uncertainly. “I did some research. All fourteen bodies are in the custody of OIA Warehouse Kilo-2 Charlie,” he said.

“Yeah, us too” said Lando. “I found out they were all OTI indentures, and none of them have been restored from backup yet. It’s only been less than ten hours though. I’m still checking my dirty networks to see if there was some kind of bodysnatching shit going on at the time.”

“Well, it said their morphs were accounted for, so...”

“Uh, as a crooked cop, I can tell you a police report can be altered to say anything you want it to.”

“That’s fair...I still think the warehouse would be a good place to start.”

“It totally would,” said Lando. “If they actually are there, this guy can examine their stacks.”

“I need guns,” said Grandwrath.

“Oh fer chrissake!” said Lando. “What are you gonna shoot at a police annex? We’re *legit law enforcement* going into an OIA station to legitimately investigate suspicious deaths! Hang on a damn second, are you--” Lando squinted at their guest’s insignias on his jumpsuit. “You transit authority, man? Railhack?”

The man nodded.

“We’re all cops?” said Lando in disbelief. “14 people die on the 14th at 14 hours 14 minutes Earth US Central time and Firewall calls *the cops*?”

They looked at each other for a moment. Lando remembered himself first. “Grand, we’re cops, going to a police station, to investigate dead guys. What in red hell do you need guns for?”

“Well,” began Grandwrath.

"Did you forget how to punch or something? You're gonna tell me you're afraid of someone now because you don't have a raildriver?! We're infamous martial artists! Look," said Rolando, putting his hands up, "if we get attacked, and you really gotta have some guns, we'll *karate* them and take one."

"Karate them?" said the Railcop.

Lando nodded. "Karate them real hard. But I promise you won't need to do any of that."

They didn't. With the group all being some manner of law enforcement, getting to see the synth bodies was rather easier than Grandwrath was envisioning. It was rather harder than Rolando apparently expected.

"I need everything on these 14 guys," he rattled off. "Bodies, findings, reports, all of it."

"Why do you need to see them?" said the woman.

"The hell do you mean 'why'?" said Rolando, his allergy to being fucking questioned making him moody.

"*Why*, do you need to see the morphs, is what I asked, Inspector..." said the OPC officer in charge, one Captain Chen.

Rolando's eyes almost caught fire. Grandwrath appeared at Lando's shoulder, looking down at the Captain, as if to say *oh, you're gonna get it now*.

"14 guys turn up dead at the same time? Maybe you guys don't notice. But the Rangers have to wonder if it's because of some dandy dogshit that came outta the zone, and they're climbing up my ass for some kind of report. As of now, that report does not mention you."

The two glowered at each other for a moment before Chen turned. "All 14 of the vics are currently housed in the meeting room."

"So, you did notice an anomaly, and you did house them together," said Rolando.

"Of course we did. Here's the information you asked for. DD439 was the only outlier, being in the middle of nowhere at the time, while DC929 and CR871 were--"

"CR871?" blurted Rolando. "He was a punk, I knew 'im in high school!" Chen stopped and turned on him. He put his hands up. "Kidding!"

The chairs and table had been moved aside. The synthmorphs occupied casket-shaped crates. They worked quietly for two hours. Grand X examined their stacks and cyberbrains. Lando went through their metaphorical pockets. The railcop watched his coworkers. He'd heard things.

Eventually they met in the middle. Lando was taking off some vinyl gloves.

"Aside from standard wear of indentured servitude," he said, snapping one glove into the other, "there is no physical damage on these morphs. No one went through their purses, no one stole their mesh inserts."

Grandwrath nodded. He was plucking some metal shavings off an instrument he'd been using. "They deleted themselves. First they wiped their stacks, then their own cyberbrains."

Lando grimaced. "Modern suicide."

"Yeup."

"But it still doesn't add up to fourteen!" Rolando said.

## AN HOUR EARLIER

About a kilometer over the land, the buzzing fans of an aerofoil fluttered within a certain flex tolerance on ultralight materials. Dangling from it like an unsteady angel was a ramshackle-looking transhuman, with visible seams in his skin. The entity was unsteady because he had opened an E-mail without thinking to land first. But it had been from The Eye. But, it had been from Proxy Weed. Firewall contained many kinds of Proxy, from many walks of translife, and some of them did not consider that sending a narcoalgorithm as part of an email might put the receiver at risk if he happens to receive it, at priority one, whilst operating an aircraft. Trying to keep a straight-ish trajectory, he also hallucinated walking at the same time, toward three figures wandering in the same direction perpendicular to his. He approached them. They were cops with their hands in their pockets, trudging, their coats catching the wind of a sandstorm.

*Find them. Help them.* The instruction was so simple it wasn't in real words.

The first one looked up. "Grand X," he said. "DeLaxie," said the one in the same colors. The third looked up and said nothing, but his insignias spoke his station clearly. Their mesh IDs appeared. Then it was over.

When he came to he'd lost about fifty-four meters of altitude and the package he was delivering hung loosely on a strap. His smartfans whirled back to attention and he gathered it up and came about, having his muse do a social media/GPS search for the three in question. Fortunately they were all together. Unfortunately they were in an OIA facility.

He skidded to a landing outside the building, found no one watching the front door of the warehouse, and headed toward the conference room.

He was stopped by someone he didn't recognize, scrutinizing the folded-up aerofoil wings on his back.

"Can I help you?" said Captain Chen.

"Yes, I need to speak to the three people in the conference room right away, I work with them," he blurted. Several social agents crashed into one another attempting to shoulder different social burdens. Voice modulation fell outside of standard. His skin mask blinked too much.

"You'll have to wait outside," she said patiently.

"Oh. Right. Thank you," he said politely, ceding the field completely. He loped back out into the yard. He assigned his muse processes to make a call.

--Hello!-- he tried.

Three lines connected. One transmitted over audio band. --Yeah?--

--I took some drugs!-- Silence. Social agents scrambled in the dark to formulate something non-alienating that made sense. --They told me to come help you guys.--

--You know, that's going around. I'll meet you outside.--

In meatspace, Rolando looked up, and actually opened his mouth. "I'm gonna go talk to this guy," he said. The other two nodded and bent back over their work.

Lando trotted out to the lone figure in the desolate district. He looked the skin-masked synth up and down, particularly his satchel and wings.



"Inspector DeLaxie?"

"You bringin' us a pizza or somethin'?"

This kind of opener provided a much better purchase for conversation. "Oh, this?" Said the synth, patting his satchel. "No, this is my day job, I'm a Blue Box guy. I was just on a delivery. Proxy Weed sent me!"

The man relaxed 15%. "Yeah, he does stuff like that, did he tell you what was goin' on?"

"No...but I can help! I'm good with infosec and programming and fixing--"

"--oh good! This way!" the Ranger interrupted.

The app the synth had downloaded to help him in social interactions, a special AR game, awarded him fifty points and dubbed his interaction SUCCESSFUL, causing the little graphic element to pirouette and chortle some vestigial human animal noise organics responded to. This was quickly overwhelmed by the Ranger. "14 guys die at the same time, on the 14th at 14pm 14th minute 14 second, we got 'em all in here, here's everything. He's wit' me," he said, pointing as they passed Chen, who looked unwilling to deal with the man again. "We checked the bodies and determined what you see there. But it doesn't add up to fourteen. You know what I mean?" They walked into the warehouse where the other two men were working. They looked up at the newcomer, but seemed prepared to allow DeLaxie's show to continue. "Gentlemen, this is Agent...um..."

"Tetsuo," said Tetsuo.

"This is Agent Tetsuo. Okay, man. These are the fourteen morphs. See what you can tell us."

The synth lit up. "Oh! Oh, good. Yes, I can do this," he said, reeling an access cable out of the back of his neck and turning one of the morphs over.

They watched. Tetsuo went in.

A great deal of nothing greeted him. For a while he couldn't find anything. He only learned anything when he began looking for why there was nothing. For all he could tell, their cortical stacks had no function at all. They were terribly out of date, and poorly manufactured in their heyday. There was nothing to find except at least 87 snippets of code that all ended in the same command on their cyberbrains. They were corrupted. But comparing them he found several corrupt libraries of several egos, which all ended in a killswitch command, deleting ego and bios, rendering both dead and useless.

They sat in the crasher truck. They didn't say anything at first.

"What's your name, man?" said Rolando.

"Hector," said the Red Northern guy.

"And Tetsuo?" said Lando. Tetsuo brightened up and nodded.

Another silence.

"They're perma'd," said Hector.

"Yeah," said Rolando.

"Yeah," said Grand X.

Tetsuo said nothing.

"We got a call," said Grand. Lando looked up.

*Two men appear on the bridge, their shoes clicking on the pavement. The night is cushioned by a cottony haze of intermittent light posts, but the silence is uninterrupted but for the interlopers. The taller one squares his hat and they move forward, their boots clicking almost offensively with authority. Their clothes melt and change even faster in simulspace. Lando's tie falls off and dissolves into a puddle of silver. Grandwrath's red hat bursts quietly into flame and then is black. Lando's muse is fully at play in the background processes, cycling through various eras, facets, and indeed definitions of style. Lando stops. Grand stops too. Two shadows appear in the mist coming the other way. They flow and slink. Heel boots, strap pumps, clumping in response to the clicking Cuban and Tuscan heels. Tommy Boy and The Pen approach Grand X and the Cybrid and meet in the middle at about the 1920's. Two females smile up at the tall, boxy males. The women are dressed as flappers, in black and white frocks, feathered hats, one carrying a handbag. The other has a Thompson submachine gun hanging off her back and a cigarette holder for accessories. The one with the purse takes a tiny black envelope out of it and hands it to Grandwrath, who pockets it.*

*"You boys are into somethin' real nasty," says The Pen.*

*"Yeah," says Rolando.*

*Grandwrath says nothing.*

*The two women glance at one another.*

*"Thanks for agreeing to meet us," adds Rolando, waking up again.*

*"Thank you," interrupts Tommy Boy, looking over at Grand X. "We love your feed." She bit her lower lip and squeezed the rifle strap. "You like guns?" she whispered.*

*"Anyway," The Pen cuts in. "It's funny you should make your inquiry right now. It's all in there, but in short, the market is flooded with bad and refurbished synths. It's a scramble. Most of 'em are busto."*

---

As the others lapsed, Rolando went outside. He stood tall on the Martian plain, the truck waiting behind him, and closed his eyes.

*"Not an X-threat," he says into the void. No answer. "Corporate foul play. We're already...taking action."*

*INVESTIGATE FURTHER, says Proxy Weed at last.*

*Lando smiles a little. "Okay."*

He came back into the truck. "What we got?"

Hector looked up first. "I had someone in the Barsoomian movement check up on OTI. Their mesh sites are all dummies. But I got three office locations."

"Dixler got back to me," said Grand X, "about your ask. Market's flooded with cheap synthmorphs and bad stacks, there's a scramble to get rid of 'em."

"I could hack their website for more information!" said Tetsuo.

"That kind of information's probably airgapped," said Lando. "Nah, let's wait until our gear is finished being fabbed, then we'll go investigate their offices. Hey Tetsuo, you wonder what's in your package?"

"Yeah!" said Tetsuo.

"Well then it's suspicious and I have to search it!"

---

Red Mario's wasn't a bad place. The owner wasn't a bad guy. He looked perturbedly at the opened box. "They're not fresh," he said as Tetsuo handed the package over.

"I had to search 'em," said Rolando.

The box was full of Lunar Bars, from the actual moon, and a 'delicacy' at this place in particular. They'd been very disappointed. Next time.

"If I may ask," said the owner, in a custom Ruster, "what are two Noctis rangers doing out here in Olympus?"

Rolando leaned in. "Gettin' somethin' to eat, man!!"

---

"That was a hell of a lot of print, man," said Po, handing Grand X a crate.

"I know. Thanks, man," said Lando, handing Po a beer.

"Next time we do business, yeah?" said the tattooed man, biting a cigar and turning back toward the bike shop.

"Sure thing, man," said Lando, walking up the ramp. Inside, he opened the box. Hector and Tetso watched. "One Candybar Suit for Grand X, one Candybar Suit for Lando, two Reaper 7 rail hand cannons for Grand X, one Eraser for Lando, one Eraser for Grand X, two plasma swords for Grand X, and we're good." Lando frowned at the smarts. They changed sluggishly. The fonts loaded late. "Bastard rushed the job. fock it. We're going to the smallest two locations first. They're easiest to lean on. We're gonna split up. Who wants to go with Grand?"

"I'll go with Grand," said Tetsuo.

"Great. Hector, we'll take the office in town. Let's go.

But they didn't split up. They arrived at a rock garden. This happened sometimes. Buildings torn down and replaced with rock gardens and made into parks. The GPS tag led to the corner near an outcropping made to look natural.

With the imagers they determined no presence of anything belonging to OTI. So they made for the next location in town.

Lando stood on the roof of the truck with the others. They squinted at the tag in the distance labeling the office on the fifth floor of a ten story building.

"If I do this they might know we're comin'" he said.

They looked at each other and nodded. Lando turned and shouldered the imager. He smiled. Then he chuckled.

"It's fockin' empty, man."

The door was kicked open.

"Open up." muttered Grand X. "Cops an' all that."

Lando surged in after him, sweeping the place. Tetsuo immediately hunted for an access jack. Hector cracked open a surveillance hardpoint.

--You guys done in there? I'm hella bored-- sent Grand X.

"Check this out," said Lando, emerging, tossing Grandwrath something. "Found that in a breaker box."

It was an OIA armband.

"Crooked cops, am I right? Haha!" Lando laughed. Grandwrath laughed. Hector shook his head as he emerged.

"This place is blacked out on the hard network. What's that thing?" Grandwrath threw him the armband. "Shit."

Tetsuo came out. Hector handed him the armband. "Crooked cops," Hector said.

"Not crooked," said Tetsuo. They all looked. Tetsuo turned it over in his metal hands. "Not cops. It's fake. You officers all have similar armbands. But they contain your badge numbers. Names. This is blank."

"Shit," said Lando. "Shit!"

"Oh. That's so illegal," said Hector. "That's so fockin' illegal."

"Land 'em in cold hoc easy," said Grandwrath. "Maybe five years."

"We busted a guy for that once," said Lando, "remember Grand? The guy trying to run the cordon disguised as a Port-man."

"Beat his ass," said Grand.

"Beat his ass," parroted Lando. "If you ever meet a Portmanteau Ranger, beat his ass. If you see anyone *pretending* to be one? Get a running focking start, *then* kick his ass."

"This is serious if they're willing to do this," said Hector.

Lando punched a fist into a palm with a leather 'slap.' "Let's fockin' bust 'em."

---

The truck rolled on [LOCATION]. Between their expertise they determined how close they could be dropped off and still be outside surveillance. They made the remainder of the trip loping in the lax gravity. Soon they thumped to a stop in a courtyard.

Instinctively, Lando and Grandwrath started sweeping the place with their Erasers.

--I see 'em,-- said Grand X.

--Shit there's actually people in there,-- said Rolando.

--What can you see?-- said Hector.

--Just blobs. If we go active they might detect us. I see five. Workin' on some shet.--

--Officers, people are getting suspicious...do you always do this?-- said Tetsuo

Lando looked up. They were indeed being observed. Several people were regarding them with curiosity or suspicion.

--Sure we do,-- said Lando, his clothes changing --Watch.-- He immediately turned his Result Gun on a passing case morph lugging a girder. A spotlight fell on the hapless indenture. "Sir?" barked Rolando. "Can I get you to comment? Sir?"

The creature shrank and walked faster. "I can't talk during my shift," it muttered.

"Are you an indenture sir? Are you familiar with the practice of fond00-forking? Do you work for OTI? Are you aware of the suspicion of fond00-forking surrounding their indenture programs?" Lando turned on another bug-eyed witness in a Ruster. "Miss? Can I get you to comment?" As if teleporting, there was Grand, holding a microphone. She was trapped. "Are you familiar with the practice of fond00-forking?"

--What the hell are you doing?-- said Hector.

--Causing a scandal.-- Grand texted. --Get inside. --

Hector nodded to Tetsuo and they dodged under the diversion and entered the transparent sliding doors.

Lando glanced over his shoulder, then at Grand, and then poured it on. He decided he wanted to make Trouble today. A microphone appeared in Grand X's hand, and he kept stopping people, one at a time, for a pushy interview. Lando began asking Questions. If you were a fond00-fork, would you know? Why can't indentures talk on their shifts? Is OIA's business practice suspect? More people began to gather. Of opposing viewpoints. Lando hoped for a confrontation. Begged for a brawl. But none started as yet.

Hector and Tetsuo rounded a corner, Hector watching the approach while Tetsuo ripped open a breaker box and plugged in a jack.

"I've already got admin," he said. "I see them outside. And I see...people with fake OIA armbands inside the building."

"Well, it got 'em left alone until today," said Hector, un-backpacking a shotgun with an underslung crako-tosser.

Meanwhile outside things were coming to a head. They were keeping the crowd's attention, but steered carelessly, the mob's ire might become too unstable. It was either going to be a fight or a complete wash. Lando took a swing for the fences.

"Have you witnessed OTI personnel impersonating OIA security personnel?" he asked the crowd. For some reason, this was a Bad Question. The crowd melted away.

But the desired effect was achieved.

--The security personnel have caught wind of what is going on,-- said Tetsuo, --they are most upset and closing on your position.--

--Good,-- said Lando, the security feed showed the two of them fade into invisibility behind cover.

--They've got guns, medium railpistols,-- warned Tetsuo.

--I got an Ultimate.--

"What's he doing?" said Hector.

"Drawing them off. I think we can help." Tetsuo connected to an emergency line. He used a voice modulator and shot in the dark to sound like someone who might work for OTI. *"The real cops are here! We got trouble!"*

Again it managed to work, three of the seven faux OIA cops turning back into the facility to harden it.

The other three emerged into the courtyard where the disturbance originated. They got ready to fan out. They swaggered with authority and poise. It was fucking offensive.

*"POLICE! EVERYBODY GET ON THE GROUND!!"* bellowed Lando, from some unknown direction. *"YOU'RE ALL UNDER ARREST! DROP YOUR GUNS AND PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD!!"*

The three OIA impersonators threw themselves behind the nearest cover, and did not drop their weapons as advised. They also couldn't quite tell where the danger was, so one of them took cover facign Grand X. A trail of vapor sliced through is skull. It burst with a 'slap' noise. Grandwrath smirked. --That's going in a highlight reel.--

*"GODDAMMIT! I TOLD YOU fockERS TO DROP YOUR WEAPONS"* Lando yelled again. One of them did, this time, but he began to run. "Shit. Get the runner." He leapt over the barrier he was using for cover, his clothing bursting into flares of angry orange and red and badges of oppressive and fascist authority. He stood face to face, gaussgun-to-pistol with the false security man.

"Who the fock are you?!" he sputtered.

Lando flashed an armband. "Mine's *real*, deadman."

There was a compound blast, a sort of *thruppp-boom*. Rolando doubled over and hstumbled backward. The Faux-IA guy toppled backwards, a smoking hole in his stomach. Rolando teetered for a moment. He had an entire magazine worth of holes in his armor and torso. His reactive armor had gone off at the same time his gaussgun had, flattening his assailant. Lando touched his belly and looked at the transparent blue blood.

Hector stepped away from Tetsuo to the wall between him and the OTI office. He gave it a quick tetrahertz scan. Lando's passive sweep had revealed several figures, but only figures. Now those were hard at work at some purpose inside. So he shouldered his sprailgun and pumped a seeker into the wall. It created a man-sized hole.

Outside, the suspect ran. Suddenly he blasted forward and toppled to the red dirt, a ring-shaped blast cutting through his core. Grand X rippled to a stop next to him. He considered ripping the man's spine out like that old video game, that might be real dig.

Hector took a sidestep, and unloaded another seeker into the man-sized hole. There was another bright HE flash, and fire.

Out of the man-sized hole came a flaming security baboon holding a shockstick. It yowled primally, swatting at itself, charging at Hector.

Lando dropped his Eraser, sagging over his target. He fell to his knees.. His hands fell on the security guard. One balled up, loaded back, and fell like an anvil on the motionless morph. Dragging him closer, Lando hit him again, and again, and again...

*"Why! Don't! You! fucking! People! LISTEN, TO, ME..."*

Hector calmly flexed his wrist, and jammed a cyberclaw into the shrieking neobaboon, then batted its shock baton aside with the butt of his gun and shanked it again, both times in the neck. It was dead, but its light still burned brightly as its fur crackled with angry flickers in the high-oxygen environment. *"Cops are surrounding the place! Oh my god! We're totally busted, man!"* Tetsuo, tried emphatically. It broke the last two completely. One sealed himself into an office. The other turned and began to run the other way, then stopped and ran back. He ripped off his arm band.

Tetsuo finished assembling a sniper rifle. He was pinged.

--Hello?--

--Tetsuo, this is Roland's muse, Tim,-- said a sympathetic and friendly voice. An avatar of a man in a nice pinstripe suit, his knuckles resting keenly against his chin, formulated in Tetsuo's entoptics. --Lando has given into some of his more feral urges. He has a few things he wants you to know, as this situation is coming to a head.--

Tetsuo peeked around a corner and went to 60 compressions.

--Okay, tell me,-- he said.

--Lando took a big risk trying to take them alive for questioning. It failed, and he's seriously injured. He wishes to point out that as of now, we have been observed committing no wrongdoing, but a response is surely coming. Hector put an HE grenade in the office. If he destroyed the evidence, we need some stacks to interrogate. That's something we *can't* be observed doing.--

--He seems to be beating a man to death in the courtyard,-- observed Tetsuo.

--Oh. Please. When's the last time anyone got in trouble for police brutality on Mars? Charges like that stick to Lando like a superball sticks to a concrete barrier. Good luck guys! Make it work! I'm going to try to get Roland's attention again.--

Lando drew his arm back again. When he threw, his arm slipped into a sleeve. He hesitated. A familiar sensation, the cool weight and smell of a fine leather trench coat. Under it, a clean suit. His hands were covered in driving gloves. His boots sparkled.

"Well who's *this* handsome guy?" Said Tim.

"...m-me," stammered Lando in a small voice. "Roland."

"And where's he going?" said Tim, gently setting a genuine-brim fedora on Lando's head.

Rolando looked down at himself. "...movie premier..." he croaked. "Or a...fine dinner...uh...horse race where it's cold..." He drew the leather tightly around his neck and shoulders, buttoning it. He shivered and sighed.

"Wow, I really nailed it that time!" said Tim.

Lando nodded. "You sure did, Timbo, thanks so much, I...oh god, the team...who's hurt?!"

"Just you," said Tim.

It had started to rain. A drizzle that turned the Martian surface into a disgusting crimson cake. It didn't stick to his smart clothes. But it coated everything on the ground making it the same red color. And his gloves.

They weren't gloves. It was blood. Half was his, blue. The brash Ranger was suddenly very fragile. He was on his knees. Below him was the remains of a Splicer's face and a formerly alive morph. His voice came weakly. He heard it calling.

"Gran..." he coughed like an ailing stoner and managed to stand. "Grand?"

"Hey!" Lando turned to see Grandwrath appear at his flank. He had a body draped over his shoulder like a hand towel. "fock you do, man?"

"Where's my gun? X, where's my gun?" He cast about.

--Don't worry about that,-- said Hector. --OIA, real OIA, is going to be coming by rail. We have 10 minutes maximum, 5 realistically. Drones are already on their way.--

"How long?" Lando grabbed the dead faux-cop's gun. It was empty. He shoved it in his coat and started casting deliriously around for his Eraser.

--...two minutes.--

"Vac me," moaned Rolando, "I'll talk to 'em, we haven't done anything overtly wrong."

--DeLaxie, you caused a scene, a scandal and a firefight, they're not going to shake your hand, they're going to vac us!-- said Hector.

"Fock! Somebody get in that office! Grand, get the truck!"

"Can I rip this guy's spine out?" said Grandwrath.

"In the TRUCK!"

--I'm immune to the fire, I'll find a place to jack in.-- said Tetsuo.

"There's no time for that! Just steal something! Anything! Everything that's not staylocked! Goddammit where the hell are you?!"

"I'm right here," said the Result Gun's device AI. An AR element appeared over a crate labeled SPACE ORANGES.

The fire had been largely extinguished. Four morphs, two dead, two too wounded to fight, were strewn around. A nanofabber was set in the wall next to a pile of synthmorph parts. On the ground was a charred rectangle.

"Got an ecto here."

--Perfect! Grab it!--

"We're exiting out the back," he said, edging out of the room carefully and meeting Hector in the hall. They started running.

Outside, the truck arrived. Lando shoved the crate off his gun and dragged it out by the strap, trailing it as he hobbled over to the ramp.

"Hi honey, how was your day?" said Grandwrath in the driver's seat.

Rolando opened the healing tank. "Long." He didn't get undressed, he hauled himself into the fluid and the drawer slid shut.



He closed his eyes. Then he hit his head. Then his face. --ARGH YOU GIGAFU-- Grandwrath muted the stream of profanity from the tank as he wheeled the truck around, stomped the accelerator, rebounded off a rock and went airborne, bouncing twice. Not a difficult maneuver on Mars, but landing it without harming an injured crewmate in a healing tank was just out of his reach that day.

He slid around a corner in the churning mud just as Hector and Tetsuo flew out of an alley, leaping over a guardrail. The ramp thumped down and they clanked inside, grabbing hold of something as Grandwrath hit the throttle again.

"Did we get away clean?" said X.

"No, I'm covered in mud," said Hector. "And they still might spot us."

"Shet," said X. "Someone climb up."

The truck had no windows but for the operator's cabin. Its exterior sensors were fairly notoriously spotty, even with Rolando's modifications. Its best sensory feature was a cupola with a hatch. Tetsuo appeared at the aperture, fixating on a distant light. It bent sharply.

--One of the drones has altered its course to intercept us.--

It was quiet for a moment.

--Shit,-- said Lando. --We have to shoot it down...who can do it? Get my gun...Tetso, get *my* gun it has...--

Tetsuo had already clanked the top open. Cold air rushed in. The barrel of his sniper emerged first. He clicked into position and took aim. Rolando continued to flail to control the situation from the health tank. --Get *my* gun! Get him my gun!--

There was a snap. A bright flowering light appeared in the sky.

Tetsuo nodded once and slid down the ladder. The cupola clanked shut. They weren't safe or certain of anything. But it was enough for the time being.

Rolando was out. Grand X voiced his thanks for this repeatedly. Tetsuo was left with the stolen ecto. He and Hector leaned over it. It was...scorched.

"Sorry," said Hector.

Tetsuo nodded silently, turning it over. "The haptic interface is gone, certainly," he said. "The casing needs to be replaced of course. But..." He reached into the back of his neck and plucked out a tiny part, connected to the back of his neck by a fishing line thread of graphene. He aimed the little plug on the ecto. He hesitated for a moment, then turned it toward Hector.

"Blow?" he requested.

Hector raised an eyebrow.

Tetsuo shrugged. "No lungs."

Hector took a deep breath and blew into the acces jack. Dust and ash flew out.

"Thank you," said Tetsuo. The plug clicked into place. His skinmask's eyes closed, and he held the ecto in his palm, like he was giving a seance. Grandwrath listened. Hector watched.

"They're zone stalkers," said Tetso at last, not opening his eyes. "They ran the zone for roughly three years. Then they went legitimate. They formed OTI."

"So," said Grandwrath, "not legitimate."

"No. Not legitimate. They still run the zone and use any parts they find in the bodies of their indentures."

This sank in for a good while.

--How long they been operatin' like that?-- Rolando was awake.

"...two years," said Tetsuo. "The parts were used in 120 other synthmorphs that we have *not* accounted for besides the fourteen we're investigating."

There was a loud impact from the tank. A stream of swear words was muffled by Rolando's muse at first. Grandwrath was muttering in harmony, also cursing. Soon this stream of profanity began to synchronize.

"Two years."

--Tactically contaminated!--

"Two goddamn years. Gonna whip some ass..."

--A hundred and thirty four?!--

"...whip some ass, whip some ass *hard*..."

--...be digging on this for the next ten *fucking years*...--

Tetsuo and Hector looked at each other. They reached the same conclusions, silently. It was a disaster. Dragging blankets of space-measels out of the Zone completely undetected, distributing them dirty, to walk around unsupervised in transhuman society...Firewall's mission was already two years too late.

"Well at least we know where they are," said Tetsuo, elevating his voice enough to be heard. The cursing and shouting stopped. "They went into the zone. Their schedule is in here, as well as where they were going."

--...are they there?-- said Rolando. --Or did that ecto belong to someone in the office? Those guys ain't goin' nowhere.--

"They're there," said Tetsuo. "Now. It's their stalking sites and itinerary. They left just before we got there."

--X, head for the border.--

Hector looked up at the tank containing Lando, which was opaque, but close enough to eye contact. "We're going into the Zone?"

--*Fock* no,-- said Lando. --*Fock* no, I hope not. But just in case I need to get some biomods...--

---

They were in Olympus ranger territory. Grand X and Lando hated dealing with 'Limps.' The Truck had to be hidden. Luckily they found the perfect crotch to wedge the House into the rocks.

Rolando was out of the tank by then. His holes were all plugged. Grandwrath had done a good job. As his clothes reassembled around him, and the others collected gear, he held court.

"I don't wanna deal with Ports," he said again. "Don't wanna talk to 'em, don't wanna see 'em, don't wanna answer questions. I do not like them and I do not deal with them."

"We get it," said Grand X, collecting his plasma swords, which looked like stretched question marks with handles when unpowered.

"You can't possibly," Rolando said. "So Hector, Tetsuo, you watch 'em. You watch left, you watch right, if you see *anything*, get inside. I'm gonna watch the border. Grand..."

"How you gonna watch the border if you wanna get bioware?" said X.

Lando shook his head. "Changed my mind, dude. I gotta be outside watchin' the border. You take 'em. You get toughed. I'll stay outta trouble, promise. You be the bodyguard today. 'Kay, man?"

Grandwrath grinned and nodded, pulling the drawer out, putting his murder-fork down again. "Oh yeah. Some skinweave. Maybe get my lungs back. But we need some stock," he said.

"Stock?" said Hector.

"Yeah, like a fabber," said Rolando.

"We still need that guy?" said Hector, pointing to the unmoving splicer OIA impersonator they'd picked up. Rolando and Grand looked down like they'd forgotten about him.

Rolando laughed. "Nah!"

Tetsuo protruded from the cupola. Hector paced back and forth between two breaks in the rock formation from which he could see their flank. He had repurposed some of his explosives into landmines at the border. Rolando was under the truck, watching the Zone intently. He swept back and forth, taking in radio waves, infra-red, cosmic rays, sound, every so often he would go active, firing waves and beams of tetrahertz, radar, sonar, visible light, invisible light, a bright and all-seeing flare of activity.

--Yazidis,-- said Lando, fixating on several blobs taking more and more shape as the imager put them together on every level. Weapons, hair color, clothing, heat signatures, they were looking. The beam was almost impossible not to detect.

--Yazidis?-- said Tetsuo.

--Space muslims,-- said Grand X. --Asyns. Wander the TQZ and shit. See 'em sometimes.--

--Weird,-- declared Lando. --Don't trust 'em.-- He sent a still image to everyone.

--Never seen one in...well, this much detail,-- said Hector.

--Yeah. Any cops?-- said Rolando.

--No cops,-- said Tetsuo.

--Nope, no cops,-- repeated Hector.

--You know somethin' now there's four of us,-- sighed Lando, shifting to mash the dust down under him. His forehead rested on the ground, letting his scope see for him. --We need a fuckin' tacnet. Stop askin' each other what's goin' on, really see it. Tetsuo, you think you could manage one o'them?--

--What's a tacnet?--

Rolando yawned. --Oh, it's great. It's this thing that lets us see each other's visual and gun feed, like, live, all-time.--

--Oh...-- said Tetsuo. It was quiet for a while. --Why don't we HAVE that?!-- Tetsuo wailed suddenly, showing real emotion for the first time.

--I know, right?--

--Yeah...tacnet...-- said Tetsuo. --...is that like one of these things?--

Suddenly everyone got an invite. And then, a feed. They saw Grand X looking around the interior of the tank. They saw Tetsuo, looking at the horizon. Hector, looking out at the plain. And Rolando's scope and all the cascading information coming through.

--Oh *shit!* Oh *yes!!*-- Lando rolled onto his back and punched the undercarriage of the House. --SHIT yeah!-- he screamed. Even his expressions of joy were somewhat violent and aggressive. --This is fockin' great, we can see *everything*, goddamn!-- He panted for a moment. --Where the fock'd you get it?--

--I have a lot of data I haven't checked through...there's a whole section of my cyberbrain blocked out, I can't crack it.--

--Well...good...-- said Lando, exchanging virtual glances with Grand X. --Uh, anyway, X, how far along are you?--

--Ten minutes,-- said Grand.

--Well that's good too. Tetsuo, how are we on time?--

--It's not looking good,-- said Tetsuo. --If they're not back in roughly 23 minutes, they aren't coming back. And that's the tail end of a twelve-hour window.--

--Is this where we vote?-- said Hector.

--I vote no,-- said Tetsuo.

--I say we go in,-- said Hector.

Grand X said nothing and smirked coolly at Roland.

Lando sighed apprehensively. It was his vote. He'd been...'leading' tentatively, but didn't want that mantle. He didn't like that kind of culpability. But this time it landed on him. He shook it off. --Well I came here fully expecting and prepared to go in there. I knew this would happen. But we made a lot of goddamn noise and got no other leads this hot. The rest is swarmin' with LEOs. Tetsuo, you can stay with the Truck, I don't want nobody touchin' it, got me?--

--Nah,-- said Tetsuo, climbing out of the cupola and pushing it closed with one foot. --It's fine.--

--Ya sure? All right. Good man. Everybody up. We ain't takin' the truck. Traveling at high speed, takin' wheels, get ya seen. There's no fence, but there's microfleas and shit in the dirt. We gotta go to boots, and we gotta do it careful. Okay?-- Everyone nodded, assembling around the cordon. --X, you take point.--

Grandwrath grinned and squared himself, shouldering his Result Gun. "Just stay behind me, lil' pod." Rolando punched him in the spine as he passed, eliciting a chuckle.

"All right, guys, check this out," said Lando as they loped over the supposed line in the sand denoting the Martian Exclusion Zone, marked by an AR element in their entoptics. "The Zone is the size of Europe. You fuckers remember Europe?"

"It was big?" said Grandwrath. Hector chuckled.

"Yeah, you could fit like, a bicycle or a potato in it, probably both. We're going to be going a long time, basically, is my point. Grand and I got food."

"What the hell are you doing?" asked Hector.

They all had adopted a bounding gait, as one does on long overland dashes in less than 0.5gs, but Rolando and Grand of them had taken on a leaping, pirouetting pattern involving their shoulder scopes, with Lando doing full spins every few steps, to sweep around behind them. It would look completely ridiculous without the trench coats.

"We're fucking scanning," muttered Grandwrath, swinging left and right.

"Whatever happens out here, we'll probably see 'em first." Lando looked the more outlandish of the two, appearing to take the strange dance very seriously, as well as his role as rear-guard.

"How often do you guys come out here?" said Tetsuo, not watching them rebound along, but monitoring their intel feed.

"Never if possible," said X. "It's big and empty and goes from boring to FF completely at random."

"Even with all that sensor equipment?" said Hector. "What's your range?"

"Four kilometers at least," said Tetsuo, trying to make sense of the information.

"Something's coming."

They all saw it at once and stopped. The two scan beams fell on an oncoming Mars buggy. Three occupants. Rangers.

"Cops get past it," said Rolando. "We fucked up."

"Can we hide?" said Tetsuo.

"We can," said Grand, his suit shifting colors in synchronicity. "Not you. They already know where we are. We've been clocked" He pointed skyward. Satellites.

Hector squared himself. Tetsuo shouldered his coilgun. "Three kilometers. What happens now?"

"Flash the badge," said Grand. He didn't sound excited to do this.

"They're Noctis." said Rolando, still watching the approach, walking slowly toward it, grimly alerting the tacnet to the HMG on the roof of the vehicle. "They're corrupt as we are. We can talk to 'em."

"We're not supposed to be here," said Hector.

"*They're* not supposed to be here," said Grand X.

"Two kilometers," said Tetsuo, the lights now visible, rolling toward them. "They're pinging us."

"I know," said Rolando, resting his Result Gun on his shoulder. He and Grand strode out to meet their intercept. Their badges and insignias appeared on their clothes, which sprouted into dress uniform, glowing elements of blue and red, the usual duster, high collars. They responded to the ping, flagging as cops. "Let's see what happens."

"One kilometer..." muttered Tetsuo.

The buggy rolled to a stop. The one on the gunner's chair held his rifle up with both hands.

This was a call-and-response signal among the Noctis rangers. To respond to this gesture by patting one's weapon was to signal that all was not okay.

But Rolando tossed his Result Gun in the air twice, flipping it the second time, another effortless maneuver on Mars, signalling the OK.

"As-salamu alaykum, brother!" called the driver.

"What?" said Rolando.

Grandwrath laughed. "Wa'alaykumu s-salam, brother!"

The three in the buggy waved. "Hey brother!" they called, variously.

"You okay, brother?" said the passenger, leaning out. They were all uniform vacsuits at this stage but Rolando and Grand knew their IDs, French-Algerian guys.

"We're okay," said Rolando, nodding carefully. "You guys okay?"

The three also nodded. "We're okay. You need a ride?"

"Nah..." said Lando. "I'm on my way to...catch a flight. Ya know?"

The French-Algerians nodded knowingly. "We know, Brother."

"All right. Be safe," said Lando.

"Be safe, Brother!" called one of them. The buggy's tires turned inward, the vehicle rotated on a dime, then straightened out and rumbled back toward their jurisdiction.

Lando chuckled. "Crooked bastids. Same as us."

"What was that?" said Hector.

"They were gonna rob us," said Lando, starting to lope toward the GPS coordinates again. "We were out of their jurisdiction, they clocked us, they could do whatever they wanted. Thank god we were also cops."

"Crank call to a rusty badge. Scopes can't detect no shit like that." Grand had also resumed his sweeping pattern and they resumed. "That's why we hate The Zone."

Lando sighed. "Back inna day, at a concert, they had these things called Mosh Pits, where you'd go fockin' crazy, you push and shove and shoulder, some people punchin', it was nuts. People at the sides would catch you and throw you back in, just give you like, a push, bounce you back, but I saw it as throwin' em back to the sharks. I loved it. Inside the Pit, lose your glasses, lose a tooth, lose an eye, but standin' at the border, all the fun, all the blood, none o' the risk. That's why I became a Ranger, that's why I went to Grid 36, to stand at the edge of the Mosh Pit, bouncing back anyone tryin' a get out. Hard as fuck to get out of a mosh pit at Burnin' Man."

"This ain't like none of your mosh pits, man," said Grand.

"Yeah it is, it's exactly like the pits."

"I've been in your music sims, everbody in a huddle trying to tank each other with dancing and shit. I'd kill a guy for that kind of certainty right now. Most advanced sensor gear available, stealth suits, body armor, and the first problem I had today was police."

"It's exactly like the pits."

## 16 HOURS LATER

The much larger Grandwrath leaned on Rolando as they came over the rise and into line of sight of the hab they were looking for. The Rangers had been only the start of their problems that day. Then it was headhunters. Lando didn't land a single shot during the fight. Hector was injured. The stress of facing them again made Lando vomit. Grand had a good laugh. Then after that, it was Wastewalkers. Two attacked them while a third bombarded them with indirect fire. Tetsuo was injured. Hector was injured some more. Grand X had moved in to finish off a straggler, and it had emptied an SMG magazine into him. The explosion of his reactive armor going off was enough to finish it then. Now Lando was the only person not injured. He'd never heard an Ultimate complain so much.

"This is it," said Rolando.

“Good, ‘cause I’m bleeding everywhere,” said Grandwrath. Rolando ignored this, anyone else would be dead by now. Instead he handed Grand off to Hector and started sweeping the place. Blobs and colors started to form as the information came together.

Everyone was dead already. No movement. Two buggies. Both of them were shot up pretty badly. One much worse than the other. Five dead biomorphs, also shot to pieces. Two bodies inside. One recent. A deal gone bad.

“You up for clearin’ this?” said Rolando.

Grand blinked back at him from behind his sun goggles. “Bleedin’, man.” Lando sighed. He pinged the two buggies. One started up. He turned to Tetsuo. “Get him into the truck. Grand, take your scope and keep watch. We’ll investigate the buildings.”

There were three hab buildings. Hector cleared one immediately, Tetsuo got to his after loading Grand into the truck. Lando went into the one with the body.

Splicer. Submachine gun. Magazine empty. He’d been running or fighting for the last three-quarters of a day. He was in no mood to draw conclusions. He recorded his forensic findings only. Scanned everything.

--Got an ego bridge in here,-- said Tetsuo.

--Don’t jack into it,-- said Grand.

--Yeah, don’t jack into it,-- parroted Rolando. --Can you steal it?--

They saw Tetsuo’s eyes examine the chair fixture and stand bolted to the floor. --I can disassemble it!--

--Don’t work too hard, man, just bash it with a wrench or something.--

--But I can do that without breaking it...-- said Tetsuo.

--We don’t need it to work. We don’t want it to work. We’re not gonna use it. We’re *never* gonna use it. An ego bridge, even a decades-old one, has volatiles, rares, all kinda other fabber chow shit we want, and we need to get well. We got fucked up today. It’s not even fucking over. Don’t jack into it, don’t turn it on, just ust it out with a hammer or some shit and get it into the truck.--

--Isn’t a truck easier to detect?-- said Hector.

--You wanna walk outta here?-- said Rolando. --Grand is fucked up. We will be dealing with Rangers. I’ve made peace with this. We are exiting via Grid 36. If we have to be intercepted, if we have to deal with Rangers, I’ll deal with Noctis Rangers. Get stacks, get guns, get everything, we’re getting the fuck outta here. Grand, you see anything?--

--I’m bleedin’, man.--

--Jesus christ.--

Rolando finished his investigation. He used some police force techniques. Some military techniques. Quite a few underworld techniques. But it didn’t add up to 14. He was shot. Emerging from the hab door, he ran into Tetsuo coming the other way, an immaculately disassembled ego bridge tower in his arms. “Got it!”

Lando shook his head. “Grand, can you drive?”

“Still bleedin’ an’ shit, man.”

“Oh fer fuck’s sake.”

“I can drive,” said Hector.

"Thank god," said Rolando. "We gotta have a talk about what other shit you can do, man. Tetsuo, I need you to change this vehicle's ID to Patrol Car 84121 please." He hauled himself into the back seat with Tetsuo.

"What are we telling the Rangers?" said Tetsuo.

"We're telling them we arrested you," sighed Rolando miserably.

"So you're going to cuff me?"

"No," groaned Rolando. "You're a synth. We'd remove your arms."

## TWO HOURS LATER

Tetsuo did not like having his arms detached. They sat in silence as the buggy bumped over the terrain. Lando stood out what he kept calling the 'sun roof' and sweeping around with active pings and waves, heedless of who it might attract. No more surprises.

He'd already passed the time by establishing a fake law enforcement ID for himself. It was okay. The ego bridge bounced in the cargo space behind them.

"What the hell are you doing?" said Grand, a rail pistol appearing in his hand.

"I'm jacking into the ego bridge," said Tetsuo.

"Didn't I tell you not to do that?!" Rolando said.

"It's fine, I've got a firewall!" said Tetsuo. Even Hector had a free hand pointing a gun at Tetsuo, and Rolando had dropped back into the cabin to aim fearfully at the synthemorph as he dove in.

Tetsuo twitched, cocking his head. "It locked me out!" he said, sounding offended.

The other three exchanged glances.

## TWO ADDITIONAL HOURS LATER

"It's another buggy. Three occupants. Two bio, one synth," said Rolando.

"Have they seen us?" said Hector.

"They're already on their way to intercept us. Jesus christ. I'm sorry, guys. I tried."

Lando's efforts to avoid detection by satellite appeared to fail then and there. Some pall of doom hung in Rolando's voice. Then his boots braced against the floorwell suddenly. "Oh! Oh shit! They're Noctis! Grand, you hear that? We just need to keep it together a little longer, are you with me?"

"I'm fuckin' bleedin', man!"

"Goddammit!"

"Three kilometers!" interjected Tetsuo. "I need my arms!"

Lando slipped back into the cabin and grabbed Grand's shoulder. "Listen to me you fucking tee-ball hodack!" he jeered. "This morning I got shot to pieces too, and the first words out of my mouth were 'Where's My Gun!' Yours were 'Help I'm Bleeding!' If ya can't take it, if you wanna be a dogshit sissymolly I'll put one in you right here, throw you the side, go home and *clone myself a new best friend!!*" Just as his voice became its most shrill, he caught a punch. It was weak but solid. "Good. Now focus."

He re-emerged from the gunwell at the top. They rolled to a stop at about 150 meters.

"Sup," called Rolando.



"Throw down your weapons and surrender," blasted the answer from behind a spotlight which his lenses barely deflected. "You have five seconds."

He pinged them and flagged as a LEO.

"Four."

He tossed his gun up, and flipped it once. Gonna be fine.

"Three."

"What the fuck, are you serious?!" He immediately pointed back. He scanned for and found their engine.

"Lando..." said Hector.

Three wounded crew. One seriously. One with no fucking arms. Rolando could see it. Another story Sentinels don't like. Both vehicles destroyed. Maybe a miracle occurs and one of us hobbles over the line. Maybe I pop their engine block on the first shot we'll get away, maybe they won't pop ours. Maybe Tetsuo can hack their device AI.

Two.

"Goddammit!" Lando screamed. He threw down his Result Gun onto the backseat and burrowed back into the vehicle, climbing over both Tetsuo and Hector to kick out the door and launch himself boots first onto the red, throwing obscenities and gestures as soon as his treads bit in. "You wanna come out here and give *me* words?! You think you can scare me with this panzer corps shit? You fuckin' bastid! You know who the FOCK I am?! Do you have any idea where the FOCK you are?!"

The spotlight followed him, but the operator had stopped counting.

"Stop where you are," said the voice firmly.

"FOCK you!" shouted Lando, stopping, but throwing the bird.

There was a pause. "What are you doing out here?"

"Arresting THAT asshole!!" Lando screamed, pointing at Tetsuo in the buggy.

"Who's your SO?"

"Gaines!"

This was true. "...are you on duty?"

"The FOCK do you care?!" Another pause. Rolando calmed himself. "Look, man. What's your name?"

"...Gaul."

"Gaul? You wouldn't believe the shit I went through tonight. You ever see a Wastewalker? You ever meet a Headhunter up close? You don't wanna." This was all true. "I've had one of the worst nights of my life. So please. I'm beggin' you. Fuck off. Level 2 favor to me. Serious."

This elicited another long hesitation. Then, "that's a nice coat you've got," said Gaul.

"Well I'm kinda using it to breathe," said Lando. "I can make you one."

They discussed this. "Tell you what...we'll be in touch."

"Then," said Lando, consciously, "I retract my L2 fave, and wait on your request for one."

"Answer when we call," said Gaul. The buggy backed up a few meters, then sprayed off back toward the border, leaving Lando standing there.

Eventually he found the strength to climb back into the buggy. He slumped into the seat and hung his head, clutching it with luxury gloves.

"Get us outta here. Jesus christ. I almost wiped us. Almost just like that. Goddamn it. Goddamn."

"Can I have my arms?!" whined Tetsuo as the buggy started bounding again.

"Yes. Fine. You can have your arms. No weapons a cop wouldn't have. Use that police ID." Lando fed one of Tetsuo's arms to the shoulder, magnets clicking, brackets locking it into place, letting him do the other one himself. He threw Tetsuo's sniper rifle onto him and shouldered his own. "Dear god, what a goddamn day."

He realized just then what was going on. Then from outside could be heard a 'thump-smack' as the front windshield exploded outward and the back window shattered away from the shrapnel of the back seat as Rolando and Tetsuo discharged their weapons. Tetsuo's head was splattered out the back of the vehicle. Rolando was unhurt. The smoking hole in the back of Grandwrath's seat told the rest.

The dust and blood and glass settled. Hector continued driving, dazed. Lando touched Grandwrath's tree-trunk neck.

"Christ on a bighweel, he's still alive."

#### ANOTHER LONG HOUR LATER

They arrived in Grid 36. They turned Southeast along the border.

#### YET ANOTHER OUR LATER

The Buggy found itself unchallenged as it passed along the border of the TQZ and found the hide where the truck had been left. The House was also thankfully undisturbed. Lando emerged from the vehicle, and dragged Grand's unconscious form out of his seat. "There you go, Hector," said Rolando. "Now you gotta car."

Rolando had long ago accepted that this day would suck. Hector had helped drag Grandwrath's body, as well as Tetsuo's remains, into the Wheel House. Lifting a gorilla into a camper on his back was just one more thing he was going to drink out of his mind later. Now he had to get the bastard into the tank. He hauled and judo'd the body into the top, splashing nutrient and nanite fluid everywhere, then collapsed out on the floor as the drawer shut itself. His eyes watched as it engaged, began to make unhappy noises, and then there was a flash like an old copy machine. Then another. Then another.

#### GOD KNOWS HOW THE FOCK LONG LATER

--We're gonna kick Tetsuo's ass,-- said Grandwrath at long last.

Rolando's eyes were closed. --We're gonna kick Tetsuo's fockin' ass,-- he whispered, finally drifting to sleep.

#### THEY AWAKENED LAST TUESDAY

They came to be. The simulspace that welcomed them was nondescript, and contained a being also recently assembled. It called itself Proxy Blurple. Its head was a purple cloud. The rest of it wore a suit.

“The ice freighter *Water of God* disappeared from its course sending only the message ‘they’re here don’t come’ and has not yet been registered by the LLA. You will be dark cast to the scum barge *Entropic Tongues*, where you will have 12 hours to secure equipment and transport. You must keep the LLA from investigating the disappearance of the vessel.”

And with that they were plunged headlong into reality, once again, for the first time ever.

Hector gasped to life in a worker pod body. When he climbed out of the Staticasket into microgravity, a case morph was hanging on a nearby strap, waiting for him. It was a nice case, if such a contradiction could exist. It slapped him on the back of the head and buzzed a laugh.

“Hah! Pod!” Jeered the voice of Grand X Alpha.

“I’m not Rolando,” said Hector Alpha, slapping him back.

There was a bang. Then another. A metal cabinet was kicked open from the inside. “Goddammit! Are you fucking serious?!” A very shoddy case morph climbed angrily out.

“Hey, I recognize that temper,” said X. “Dr. DeLaxie I presume?”

Rolando Alpha kicked off the beaten door across the cargo container they found themselves in. “I can’t believe this shit!” He screamed. “I need a Hatemuncher!!”

Nobody had come out of their deployment with their heads on right. They all had dysmorphia. Everyone suffered resleeving sickness. Forking disorder. TC-36 was almost worse off than Rolando. arrived tardy, catapulted into a very terrified bouncer morph, having only had a flesh face before. Now he had to deal with lungs and a meat brain and hunger and toilet needs all at once. He awoke alone in the cargo container and had to be talked down several times only after he collected himself enough to receive calls. Hector and Jimothy avoided the more unstable team members, and sought to secure transit to the hot zone. Rolando and Grand X found themselves ground down to equals, except even both in case morphs, DeLaxie found himself at a further disadvantage for being saddled with an abnormally cheap and dated chassis. This fleaborg had been ridden several times. It was stippled with decals and unaddressed discoloration from this and that dirty job. The Guanxi presence on the Entropic Tongues was snapped to attention rather sharply, but successfully, to welcome the pair and their first favor to G36 was to fabricate their infamous uniforms, equalizing the whole team much more, but still leaving the Doctors a head shorter than the rest of the team. This mattered less in microgravity where the ridiculous length of their various coats covering the shortness of their legs. Dr. X was compensating for having his jeans taken away by being more aggressive, taking several fights to drum up the social credit to get their Result Guns, and Rolando secured a Transtogie™ and needed to be by himself for a while, arranging all the social movements from what qualified as a cantina. All he’d been able to focus on in his new cheap cyberbrain was a shopping list. Candybar Suits and Result Guns were acquired quickly. He gave TC-36 a small task. It was difficult.

After bouncing around the cargo container with gravity missing, TC managed to make a clear decision to reach out to his friends. The TacNet came on abruptly. Suddenly they could all see each other clearly.

“Waaaagh?!” he wailed.

“Tetsuo?” said Rolando.

“TC!” said Grand X. “Glad you could make it.”

"TC?" said Lando.

"Where the..." TC hesitated a second, searching for some words to express himself. They came sluggishly to him. "Where the f...where the FUCK are we?"

"A scum barge," grumbled Hector. "We were plucked for an op. You're a fork."

"Waaagh!" he repeated, clutching his head, the sensation bleeding to the others. They felt his rising panic.

Rolando was good at talking people down. But not in a nice way. "Hey. HEY!" He shouted. Silence. TC froze visibly. Even the others hesitated. "LISTEN you gigabastard! We're on a scum swarm and you're the only Anarchist! I need you to get something, can you do it?!"

More silence except shaky panting, which began to steady, just a little.

"We're going on an op, you hear me? I NEED you. You hear me, jackass? Hah? I need you. We're going somewhere and have no idea what we're walking into. Get your suit on and get on the horn, okay? I need you to get somethin' fer me."

"Wh...What is it," stammered TC-36, feeling himself all over with his four hands.

Rolando sighed. Progress. "You ever hear of a disassembler swarm?"

"M-maybe before, once, I'll...I'll look it up and--"

Rolando was racking his own now-limited brain. "Na, na, na, don't worry about any of that. It's a nanoswarm, okay? It breaks stuff down and turns it into raw material. Even people. It EATS you. Okay? It's like a gas grenade that devours you alive, skin from flesh from bone, that sound like fun to you, havin' that happen to ya? It hurts. Now the Candybar Suit is a little protection, you got that? It has to eat the suit first but that ain't good enough. Now listen, you listening to me?"

Everyone was listening.

"Yeah...that's really bad, what do we do?"

"I need you to scare up some guardian swarms, can ya do that?"

"Guardian swarm!" TC bleated. "Guardian swarm!"

"Whoa-whoa-whoa! It's this counter-swarm, got it? Ya see? It eats other swarms before they can eat you, you got that?"

There was a long silence.

"...why don't we HAVE that?!" wailed TC.

Rolando sighed with relief. To a degree everyone did. "I need you to get me that, okay? We've been lucky so far, but I need it," said Rolando, calm now. "Can ya do it?"

TC was panting slower now. "Yeah..." he said at last. "Yes...affirmative, I can make s-some calls!"

"Great. Hector, we got like no time to get a taxi, can you do it?"

A grunt for an answer.

"Fine. Grand?"

"Busy, man." Through the tacnet, they could all see he was already squaring off with a tough-looking synthmorph, surrounded by unsavory and feral Anarchists, waving chits and spark-lighters, placing their bets. "Gettin' guns."

"For fuck's sake. I need a goddamn drink and a smoke."

"You can't," said X, squaring off against his opponent. The challenger's faceplate was stenciled with the word HAN in Korean. "You don't got no mouth."

"I don't give a compound shit," said Lando as the sound of clacking punches and kicks began to mingle with the rest of the team's activity, TC not paying enough attention to fade this out, his muse preoccupied with calming him. "I'll be at the Space Pub."

The SpacePub, which was really its title, differed greatly from a terrestrial bar, which has the luxury of a discernible "up" and "down." In space, the Autonomists at least, get creative. The establishment was divided up into capsules, bullet-resistant saran wrap bubbles clustered together around a main driftway. One of these on the far side of the pill-shaped module was being watched and avoided at the same time by most people.

Braving this, and not loving it, Hector pushed off the bulkhead frame and across the array of bubble tables, until he came across one and peered inside.

A short pile of clothing glared back at him, one arm cradling a very jagged assault rifle that took up his whole right side. The bolt was closed. It did not have a safety.

"That thing is dangerous," said Hector.

"It's a gun," came a much more thickly accented voice than usual.

"It's a piece of shit," said Hector, pointing at it.

"I'm a criminal."

Hector climbed uneasily inside the bubble and carefully strapped himself into one of the bucket seats across from DeLaxie, asking, "do you have to terrorize people with an...exploding bullet launcher?"

"I'm a criminal," Rolando said again. AR smoke came out of the Transtogie aggressively. "And we find ourselves disadvantaged, taken advantage of, and taken for a ride in bad wagons all. So yes. I am compensating by being more pissed off and unstable than usual. I am being feared today. Now if I may ask, what the fuck is going on?"

"What do you mean?"

Various participants in the tacnet exchanged glances.

"What the hell happened in Noctis?"

Hector smiled. "Let's just say that while everyone else found the time to back up afterward, you decided to disappear into your patch of empty red and become some kind of shadow figure, and I for one just let you go. All I know for sure is, you can't cover your larceny with a badge anymore."

"Can't I?" Growled Rolando's voice from somewhere behind a scarf and fedora.

Tim had long ago assigned Hector his own interpretation of the G36 omniform, usually a vintage style kepi and thick, professional peacoat and clean dress uniform like a railroad soldier of the railroad boom in old earth United States, varying in color, number of gold buttons, pockets etc., but always long and encasing, with gloves and boots and even spats from time to time. He was beginning to feel the dignity of it, letting it put him on equal social footing with the simmering DeLaxie before stepping into more dangerous territory.

"Well aren't you the angry inch," said Hector, as a toaster-sized drone delivered a gravcup of space whiskey to his hand. "But that's the best part. I can't tell you anything."

Rolando had begun repeatedly ckanking the Hatemuncher against the side of his head. Both rattled cheaply. "You know, I was unstable before, but today?"

"Oh, that's the thing. I don't know. At all. Because whatever happened in Noctis was so obscene, I did a roll-back."

"...no shit."

Rolando received a video. It was of Hector. It looked like he was being interrogated.

VOICE: "You're sure you want to do this?"

HECTOR: "Oh yeah. Trust me. I don't want to remember ANY of this."

Rolando stopped clank-clank-clanking the machine gun against his chassis.

"Yeah," said Hector nodding. "But what I do know is this. If you want to sow terror, if you want to become some shadow figure, if you want to be some new type of transient arch criminal, you won't be able to cover your larceny with a badge or oppress with a military service boot anymore. Because you are neither soldier nor cop nor some hybrid bastard of either." Rolando was considering a lot of things. One of them was testing the protective power of Hector's Candybar suit against the splattering rounds of the "Stress Eater" but this was interrupted.

"Don't listen to 'im," said Grand X. The tuxedoed creature climbed in first, then turned and tried to haul a very large rucksack through the opening to the bubble. It clattered dangerously, causing a murmur in the gravbar as he pulled the bag full of guns into the capsule.

"Are we still Rangers or ain't we?" Demanded Rolando.

"Nobody is," said X, unconcerned.

Hector finally took a sip of his drink, looking fixedly at Rolando.

Dr. X belted the sack into its own seat, then himself into another. "But trust me, it's okay."

"Okay?!" Said Rolando. "Who the hell is he?"

They looked up at the entrance to the bubble again. A synthmorph in a Stetson, duster, vest and spurs was at the opening, obviously a Candybar Suit. It had G36 identifiers on its hat and a tin-looking badge gleaming on the vest. It hesitated before climbing in.

"Jimothy, he's a stack trader, but it's okay," said Grand X.

"Okay?!" Lando said again. "Why are you telling me shit is okay right now?"

"I just got something called a blowjob!" Said Tetsuo. His deranged, smiling face poked inside, the grab-net not disturbing his beret and paramilitary-chic coat as he scrambled clumsily inside.

"Holy shit," said Lando.

"How was it?" Said Hector.

"Tasted funny!" Said Tetsuo brightly. "It was like...being part of a protein chain!" He held up two lipstick-sized canisters. "I got your things though!"

"Can we get him a drink?" Called Hector. Eventually one was thrust timidly inside. It bounced off Hector's chest, bypassing his outstretched hand, and he sighed and caught it, handing it to Tetsuo. It was a squeeze bottle made of edible wax.

"Somebody wanna tell me what's going on now?" said Rolando.

"So how do I swallow stuff? Do I breathe it, or...?" They all looked at Tetsuo again.

"Just do what you did with your blowjob," said Grand X.

"Oh, okay," said Tetsuo. He put the end in his mouth and put positive suction on it until the seal broke, then he spit it out, scattering a cloud into the air. Grand started laughing. Tetsuo peered at the end, and squirted himself in the eye. "Ouch! That happened too!"

"Jesus, that didn't take long. Someone already took advantage of one of our personnel. I'm gonna have to shoot somebody," said Rolando in disbelief. "Already."

"Well you're gonna have to do it before our flight leaves, these guys run a tight schedule," said Hector, now cringing a little inwardly.

"What guys?" Said Lando.

"The guys who are giving us a ride to the site. It's the best I could arrange."

"You realize we're probably gonna have to kill 'em right?"

Hector pursed his lips. "I know."

"So can you fly it?" Said Grand X.

"No," said Hector, nodding to Jimothy, who had been silent up until now. "He can. Come on, we gotta go."

"Let's shift our borrowed asses," said X, grabbing his hazardous cargo as everyone except Lando unbelted and detached themselves from their 'seats.'

"Doctor," said Rolando, catching his friend's arm. "Xutuulu. Indulge me."

"Come, Doctor," said Xutuulu, rotating his wrist into a handshake and pulling Dr. DeLaxie along. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"...I remember backing up," said Rolando, allowing himself to be towed. "Before going to get Something to Eat. Did we get it?"

"It all turned out okay." The micro-Ultimate kicked his gun sack through the envelope opening of the grav bubble, it took a few. "It kind of started before that. You remember we had to Go In?"

"I remember having to Go In," said Lando. He gave the duffel bag a kick of his own and it shifted. One of the weapons beeped in protest, its device AI ineffectually bleating that all users should handle it carefully. "I hate Going In."

"What do you remember?"

"It was a meeting, I was probably high as fuck."

"You get real ballsy when you're stoned," said Dr. X.

"Fill my head," said Dr. DeLaxie, climbing out and hauling not only the Hatemuncher, but his own sack full of five Result Guns.

### **PREVIOUSLY ON MARS**

*We went into the city, you and me, you remember that. The meeting happened. You probably don't remember that. I recorded it for you but it mostly didn't concern us meaningfully. That wasn't the fun part. That came when OIA guys showed up to try to question us about the mess with OTI in Olympus. They tried me first, took me aside. You looked pissed, even kinda worried. Like they were pickin' on me. Sweet of you, but I did all right. I let 'em talk at me for several minutes. That kind of upset them, but it got them to reveal what they were on about. They were looking into the shootout. So I said,*

*"Oh, you want the other guy."*

*The one on the right said something like, "excuse me?"*

*And I told him I was subcontracted to you. I even threw the documentation at them. I'm not sure if it was because I gave them papers to eat or because they were shorter than me and*

*were just fucking randomites by reputational comparison, but they were done with me then and there, so they tried you.*

*You don't remember?*

*I recorded that too if you want to see it, but they came up to you, and said something like "you gotta come with us." You didn't even move, I remember you looked at them like they were tiny annelids. Then you did your thing. Launching in, hand gestures, showing your teeth like you do, rising up a little, spreading your shoulders out, getting 'bigger,' you basically said...*

*"Pod people engineered by the Titans. Flying buzzsaw head-collectors. Wastewalkers with indirect fire miss-siles and machiney-guns where limbs might normally be. Swarms of microbees that eat you one layer at a time. Lunatics with some kind of exsurgent religion. Places where gravity is fucking reversed. Anyone walking out potentially a disaster. I have documentation of all of this. That's the Zone. Maybe you've heard of it. We deal with awfulness you can't imagine, and I have to chase demons you never need meet because of the sleep my partner and I lose over it. Sometimes I chase them into the city before they can do more damage, so as you can imagine, this work is very important. Which is why, in order for...Olympus Infrastructure...to fucking interfere, they have to submit at about three pay-grades higher than mine, to so if you can possibly ascertain exactly who is in charge of me and Dr. X, and if they ever care to message you back, then you can come back for some more abuse. So if you're trying to fucking spook me? This is what you have to beat."*

*I don't know what you sent them, but one of them yelled "jesus!" and the other looked like he refused to open it. He just said "this isn't over, Lieutenant-Commander," or something. That shoulda been that, but there was Gaul, behind us, with two of his guys, and he was like...slow-clapping, you know? And you asked if he was going to play nice. IF he was going to take an L2 fave, or if he was going to twist your nuts.*

*And long story short...he gave the wrong answer.*

*You were even kinda...Nice. You offered him a Candybar Suit. He just told you to wait for his call.*

*But we don't play that, now do we? So we decided to kill'im. Later.*

*It would turn out not to be that much later though.*

## PRESENTLY OFF THE ENTROPIC TONGUES

The ship, a compact van of a thing, was crewed by two Hungarian post-nationalists [whose names I don't remember.] The G36 team sat huddled in the back, much of the cargo space devoted to Result Guns and other artillery. G36 communicated mostly wirelessly.

"What's your business out in the black?" Said the pilot.

They looked at each other. Xutuulu thought of telling them they were out to commit a terrible atrocity for the good of transhumanity just to see if they'd believe it but chose to hold his digital tongue. Rolando considered saying something about a suicide mission. Since no one else opened their mouths, Lando gave a tight-lipped story about looking for a VIP in their charge on the Water of God.

"Nice day for it," said the other, obviously. "You know, considering."

Rolando cursed inwardly. They were Nice. They had pictures and Hungarian trinkets all over the cockpit and cabin walls, photos of old Earth, even a pair of fuzzy dice hanging from a



superfluous rearview mirror. He “glared” pointedly at Hector, as much as his volleyball-shaped and featureless head would allow. The sunglasses made the point.

--*When did we become G36?*-- said Rolando. They were all wearing different interpretations of the omniform, but were always all five the same color, and all sporting G36 logos and identifiers.

Tetsuo brightened with a manic grin. --*When you whipped my ass and changed my name to TC36!*--

--*Shit,*-- said Rolando.

### PREVIOUSLY ON MARS

*I woke up again, in an expensive apartment again, and I resumed my job at Blue Box until I got a package, to deliver to myself! It had an ecto, a Candybar Suit, and directions to where to find my plane! The ecto said TC36 on it, and there was a message on it for someone named TC36, and that was me! It told me where to find a portable airplane, and directions to fly it into a place called Grid 36, where I belonged! The message said I worked for you, and it was time to come home! I got all excited and flew out there, and I met you, dressed like me! You welcomed me into the van, took away my suit, and let Grand X beat me up for fifteen minutes! It was bad, but then, you came in and told me you were doing it to teach me to listen to my friends, and showed me a video of me, trying to kill your best friend. You let him beat me up more, then told me that my name wasn't TC36, just like it wasn't Tetsuo the first time. You told me everything, at least I guess you did, and you said my name was Trash Compactor Of Grid 36 until we found out what it really was, and that I worked for you now! You gave me back my suit, gave me the Result Gun, and declared us all a criminal outfit, G36, and you invited Hector! It was great!*

“We’re at ping,” said the pilot.

--*How was getting your ass beat for thirty minutes ‘great?’*-- said Rolando.

--*Oh, it wasn't so bad, I just turned my pain receptors off.*--

Grand X swelled up. --*You did WHAT now?*--

Tetsuo, or TC36, leaned back a little, but Rolando put one hand on Dr. X's shoulder and guided him back into his seat.

--*Next time you will not be able to do that, mister Trash Compactor.*-- Lando looked up at the pilot and copilot, who were trying to radio in to a very large vessel hovering outside visible through one of the few round windows in the vehicle. “Whatzamatter?” Lando said, out loud.

“Water of God, come back?” said the pilot again. The two men at the helm controls sprang into action. Rolando's heart sank. They were Good People. “We gotta get in there, count some heads, you guys go find your veep!”

“We’ll do that,” said Rolando, trying to glare hideously at Jimothy and Hector.

The airlock opened.

It was Yellow. The yellow rolled lazily in. A Result Gun scan concluded it was an opaque cloud of some particulate matter. Dr. X looked more closely.

"What the fuck is this shit?" said Rolando. "Aspirated piss? Mountain Dew? It's all yellow, like a Coldplay song in here."

"Spores," said X decisively. "Mold spores."

"Mold?! Hahahahaha--!" said TC36, laughing awkwardly, still mastering that impulse.

"Penicillin?" Said Rolando.

The stuff dusted the walls. It tried to cling to their candybar suits, but was spurned. It hung in the air, a solid haze thick enough that Result Gun imaging was necessary to navigate. The hyperspectral ghost scope cut a clear path through the pallid mist, and through some of the walls. No movement.

"We'll go to bridge," said the co-pilot. Rolando and Grand had gone out of their way to avoid learning their names. "You guys find your VIP, yeah?"

"Yeah," said Lando darkly.

"Good luck!"

They proceeded a few meters into the first module.

"Bodies," said Jimothy.

They were wholly subsumed my mold.

"Shit, that one's breathing," said Lando.

"Movement, sir! Movement!" Chattered TC36.

"Vac me," growled Lando.

Grand X didn't hesitate. One of several "Derivnikov" imitation space-AK's was already shouldered and hammering into the quivering cadavers, one of which did manage to flail toward G36 before being hosed. Each hit caused a sick yellow burst to further cloud the atmosphere.

Lando struggled the Hatemuncher to his shoulder too late. He cursed.

The bodies were fairly dismembered. It was over in three seconds. There was a mix of disgusted noises from the team except Grand X. Though thoroughly protected, their weapons were coated in decomposed viscera. One of the terminally victimized crew had been wearing a vac suit. It had corroded holes.

"We gotta get this shit off us," said X.

They looked at each other. One by one, their suits spat and flickered with electricity. The spores that managed to stick began to smoke.

"...but we need something more permanent," said Lando.

They went to Engineering, hopping between handholds and bulkheads, little room to pass one another. TC managed to collect himself long enough to access the ship's records. Now Hector moved from machine to coupling to release, systematically dooming the vessel, a process Rolando found largely impenetrable, but everyone else seemed to have some way of helping with.

"What are you doin'," muttered Lando.

"I'm not sure I want you to know anything at all about how to do this," said Hector.

Rolando looked at Dr. X, who just grinned and shook his head.

"Um...everyone is accounted for except...one shuttle and nine crewmen.

"Shit," said Lando. "You know we have to beat the Posthungarians back to their hippie van." He stuck the end of his Transtogie to where his teeth might be. It adhered, smoke trailing 'upward' from the tip.

As they rebounded much more quickly back the way they came, Lando cringed as they were contacted.

"Hey, we made it to the bridge. Nobody alive. Turns out nine guys escaped, one of them might be your VIP."

"Yeah, great," said Rolando slowly, but moving quickly. "You guys find anything?"

"Bodies," said the other voice. "All yellow."

"Let's head back to the runner, we'll see if we can find your friend," said the pilot.

"Yeah, great," said Rolando, glancing at the others, who were rebounding along, throwing themselves forward with all the alacrity they could manage in the crowding and gravity. Their skill at this was not equal, and they had to continually stop for one another.

They made it just before the Post-Hungarians did.

"Get this thing moving," demanded Lando, as the airlock cycled shut.

The one called Jimothy swung into the pilot harness, grabbed the old flight yoke, put his fist around a release, and pulled.

There was a loud thump. The craft lurched. Then nothing. Everyone stared at Jimothy.

"They're here," said Hector, needlessly, they all saw it, the craft's external camera feed saw the two throw themselves down the docking spar to the bulkhead.

Jimothy tried again. Thump! Lurch. The craft bounced, springing on docking baffles. Nothing.

"Jim, goddamn you!" Rolando screamed.

One of the exterior cameras went out. The pilots knew what was going on. One had begun shooting with a shard gun, spraying the fuselage.

"Goddammit, Jim, if you don't get us out of here!!" screamed Rolando.

Instead of repeating the same motion, Jimothy frantically released another valve, then the first.

Pop. Thump. Lurch. Drift. They rolled out into space.

"They're pinging me," said Hector grimly.

"Don't answer," said Rolando. "Just don't do it."

Jimothy looked at Rolando fearfully. "Don't answer," Rolando repeated.

Grand X snorted as he was pinged..

"They're pinging me too," said TC nervously.

Grand and Lando shook their heads.

The pilots did not try pleading with DeLaxie.

Jimothy finished bringing them haphazardly to a 'safe' distance. All eyes were out the meager porthole on the starboard bulkhead.

The Water of God, hauling enough ice to sustain a colony, containing two angry, fearful, hopeless transhuman beings, vaporized soundlessly, thoroughly, completely in space.

TC-36 changed the credentials on the ship to reflect its new ownership. Everyone, except Rolando for some reason, was in a distraught mood at what they'd just had to do. Lando was just angry they weren't finished.

"There Water of God was headed to a station called Jameson-223," said Jimothy, not meeting Rolando's automated gaze. "If the shuttle they launched went anywhere..."

"Head there," said Rolando icily, "If you can possibly figure out how."

Jameson-223 was a cold greeting.

The cantina of a vehicle that is not spun for gravity makes several concessions, such as the loss of a discernible "up" or "down." Not chairs, but refuges from the terminal ennui of drifting with one's limbs whipping free; cocoons of elastic webbing in bucket "seats," situated in graphene bubble compartments in hexagonal formation around a cylindrical throughway in which the main music track thumped on audio and AR bands. No tables, just netting over the circular, rubberoid-rimmed opening to each bubble, to keep the articles of the occupants from floating out and adding to the clutter of microgravity living. Hector peered into one of these and saw one of these alcoves occupied by a suspiciously Result-Gun-looking piece of Diane Von Furstenburg luggage, and a well-dressed child mummified place in elastic strapping. Its arms and head emerged from this as if sprouting from a seed bomb. One three-fingered hand was tangled hideously around a Transtogie™. The opposite arm was occupied with cradling an assault rifle that gave the impression of being much bigger than the figure carrying it. Hector recognized the Verto V2 model right away, even with the words "STRESS EATER" scrawled along its jagged outer casing in glowing paint that appeared to be still drying.

"That thing's a piece of shit," said Hector, pointing cautiously at it.

"I'm a criminal," said Rolando dryly.

"And retired cop."

"Nobody's a cop out here, trainwrecker."

"No. Nobody's a cop anywhere if his name is DeLaxie."

"All cops is criminals. You're a criminal, tradin' numbers. The guys with the biggest guns say I'm a cop and you're a cop and so we're cops. Today I have the biggest gun and I say all cops is criminals."

"That's not accurate."

"That cops is criminals?"

"That criminals is cops."

Lando seemed to engorge like an angry little nipple, slowly expanding vertically to fill out the belts he'd wrapped himself in.. He threateningly clacked the side of the Hatemuncher against the side of the case's head. Both rattled cheaply.

They were all suffering morphing sickness. Forking shock. Dysmorphia. TC was half crazed being in a biomorph for the first time. Grand X was 50% his normal size. Hector had managed to land a Worker Pod of some kind. Lando was the worst of all, a thoroughly used

flavor case, and he was compensating by trying to be twice as terrifying. It wouldn't be a problem without his edits. Anything could prime him. He was liable to start vomiting very effervescent and excitable projectiles into the tableau if something set him off. The noise alone would be excruciating. Rolando noticed that his gun was getting a better trigger response than his Normal Anger was, so he began to thump it slowly against his cranial region. Individually-packaged high-explosives, packed against exploding propellant, rattling against each other like beer bottles, in the ammunition reservoir of a weapon of questionable manufacture, bumped against the skull of a mad bastard.

"Can I get a drink in here?" Said Hector. A moment later a prehensile foot timidly jabbed an undulating bottle through the webbing. It bounced off Hector's outstretched hand and scowling face. He sighed and picked it out of its way and bit open the top, swallowing it, ignoring the angry peacock with the machine gun. Outside, various scummers were staring. The bubbles were sound-pocketed, and one of the occupants didn't have lips to read, but it appeared to very high-reputation figures were at confrontation. Several lifelogs and glit feeds caught small enough snatches of the scene through the blurry capsule-wrap to blow way out of proportion in sensational stories about fifteen to 300 people at most would access. Hector let them watch. Rolando's body language suggested that if he had a face it would be very cross.

"Rangers are police. Rangers are military." Said Rolando.

"No, there is, at most, one cop, in here." Hector squeezed the contents of the whole bottle into his mouth, swallowed it, then began chewing on the end of the empty. He swallowed some of this and continued to eat the bottle. After a moment he shrugged. "It's edible," he said, offering the bottle to Rolando.

"Why?"

"Because it's made of this wax that--"

Rolando leapt violently out to the limit of his moorings' elasticity and slapped at the bottle, failing to disarm Hector of it. "You're not a cop anymore," said Hector. He didn't take another bite.

"You gigabastard, I said why," said Lando, seething in place.

"Oh that's the best part. I don't have to tell you."

"You know, my G-followers really want me to try this thing out, Heck," said Lando, clacking the gun against his head again. "See what it does to people. Ya know?"

Hector pursed his lips, nodded, then, very innocently finished eating the seaweed wax compound container, took a deep breath with biomorph lungs, said, "You're not a cop anymore. Because you're not a Mars Ranger anymore. Because Nobody Is. I'm not telling you why, because I can't, because I don't know. Because after we went into Noctis, we all backed up except you, and me."

"Why didn't--"

Hector pointed at Rolando reproachfully. Rolando sagged. He stopped abusing the unstable military ordinance and said "Proceed."

"Only X knows why you didn't back up. You and he disappeared into Grid 36 with that stupid bus of yours and became some kind of shadow figures, some kind of myth. Excuse me a second." Hector climbed out of the bubble netting.

From outside, Rolando could hear a muffled *"hey could I have--?"* followed by response, distorted by that particular measure of the music outside, *"just take --!!"*

Hector climbed back into the capsule holding four more of the blue squeeze-eaty bottles by two vacant rings in the pack.

"And I didn't back up because whatever happened in Noctis was so foul I had it redacted."

"How the hell do you know?"

A window flicked up of Hector's face. It was timestamped two weeks ago. He waved his hands around his head in frustration for a moment. *"I don't want to remember ANY of this, I want it redacted,"* his modulated voice muttered. Hands from out of frame pushed him down onto an ego bridge and the window cut out.

"I just thought you'd like to know," said Hector.

"Where's X?"

"Oh." Hector bit off the head of one of the drinks without separating it from the turtle-killer. "He's out buying like a fockton of guns."

"Oh goddammit!" Rolando yelled, thrashing, slamming the Hatemuncher against the side of the bar pod. Two people in the cantina screamed. Local enforcers had closed in long ago but none were quite committed enough to get too close. Rolando knew anarchists.

Except maybe one, whose insanely bright smiling face appeared in the round entry space.

"I just got something called a blowjob!!" said TC36, climbing into the chamber, fumbling several times before Hector dragged him in and placed him in one of the six car-seat-like alcoves.

"How was it?" asked Jimothy slowly. Everyone waited.

"It was like...being part of a protein chain!" Hector offered TC a drink. TC took it excitedly. "This'll get the taste out of my mouth!"

"Jesus," said Rolando.

"Do you guys just breathe liquids or...? How does swallowing work? I haven't figured it out."

"Just do what you did when you did your blowjob," said X.

"Oh!"

Rolando watched as TC sucked on the end of the bottle until the seal gave way and then cheerfully spit it out into space where it attenuated through the netting and caused echoing complaints outside.

"Great. You have a talent for if you ever lose your job at Blue Box again," said Lando.

TC looked at him with eyes of infinitely deep innocence. "I work for *you*."

Rolando had very little body language to speak of being a synth under heavy smart clothing designed to hide his morph, but somehow in the way he glanced at Hector he transmitted...concern.

"I'm the Trash Compactor of Grid 36!" said TC36 brightly, squirting himself in the face with the bottle.

"...I remember, look, what happened after we went into Noctis City?"

“Ummmmmmmmmmrrrrrrr...” TC cocked his head, his face twisting into a sheepish grin.

“First time with a bio-brain?” said Rolando.

“Ummmmmmmyeah.”

“Did we get the microwave?”

TC broke into a ridiculous drunken grin. “Oh, we got it!”

“But?”

TC grinned doofishly. “Bunch of stuff. Wasn’t *that* bad.”

Rolando looked from TC to Hector and back a few times. Hector stared at TC in disbelief.

“After you...did the thing in Noctis, you gave me a call.” said TC. “You said I should stop delivering packages and come work for you in the middle of nowhere, so I did.”

“What kinda work?”

TC giggled a steady awkward trill for much longer than was socially applicable, then stopping abruptly. “Flying around in my plane with your clothes and your camera looking at the Zone.”

Rolando looked at Hector. “Hector here says I’m not a cop no more.”

TC looked between them, not comprehending, but grinning his new organic teeth anyway. “Oh, that doesn’t matter.” He looked between them again, neither comprehending. “Hahahahahaha--! Don’t you remember?”

Another case morph in a tuxedo vaulted ably into the barbubble. “Don’t listen to ‘em, Deez.” He turned and tasked an old duffel bag against the opening, pulling once, then twice to get it through. Weapon muzzles protruded from various holes in the canvas rucksack, which rattled with more excruciatingly hazardous cacophony as Grand X hauled it through the net, lashed it to the pile of disguised Result Guns and spare Candybar Suits, and assumed a position next to Rolando, accepting the Transtogie for a puff before handing it back. “Relax. We came out on top.”

“How ‘on top’?”

“What’s the one thing better than being a cop?”

“Being left alone,” said Rolando immediately.

Grand X pointed at him like a jazz musician, produced a flat disc, slapped it against his knee expanding it into a tophat, which he set upon his head.

“You’re serious.”

“As a Hatemuncher,” said Grand X, stroking Rolando’s gun lasciviously.

TC abruptly laughed. “Hahahahahahahaha--!”

“I don’t want to hear this,” said Hector.

Rolando looked at him. “We need transit.”

Hector nodded slowly. “...I can get that.”

Hector exited and a synthmorph came in, as much as anyone could be recognized as a synthmorph in the G36 smart-omni-uni-form.

It was quiet for a long time.

--Who the fuck is he?-- Messaged Rolando.

X looked at Jimothy. "He doesn't remember you." X looked at Rolando. "This is Jimothy. He's a BEAM."

Rolando looked at Jimothy. "You're a BEAM?"

"What's a BEAM?" said Jimothy, looking at Grand X.

"Big Earner of Actual Money."

"Oh. Yes. I am?"

Grand X looked at Rolando. "He's a stack trader."

Rolando fixated on Jimothy. Grand X chuckled. "If you weren't in our uniform, Deez would eat you. Eat you for real."

"Why do I have a stack trader in my outfit?" said Lando.

"Tell him," said Grand X.

Jimothy looked uncertainly from Grand X to Rolando. His interpretation of the uniform was a Hell On Wheels Stetson with a vest and  $\frac{5}{8}$  length coat, a bolo tie and rawhide gloves. Most of his face, like the faces of all G36 agents, was obscured, in his case by a bandanna held up by a bolo tie with four gold aglets clasped by a stylized Sheriff's star. His boots were mostly holographic in microcravity, huge heels and obnoxious spurs. "Because you owe me your ass," recited the cowbot carefully.

"I owe you my ass?" Rolando looked with equal suspicion on both men.

TC blew a raspberry. Everyone looked. "I just learned how to do that!" he crowed.

"We have to get out of here soon," said Grand X.

Rolando grabbed his lapel. "LOOK motherfucker! I have no idea what's going on! Take a moment outta yer day!"

Grand X contacted Hector for some kind of timeline. Hector was negotiating something messy but serviceable. There would be strings attached. Best not to tell Rolando about it. Best to tell him about something else.

"You wanted a nanofabber."

"Yeah," said Rolando.

"You wanted one really bad."

"Yeah."

"Really bad."

"Bad enough to do what?" said Rolando, impatiently.

"Make a deal, at first." Grand X held his hand out. Rolando semi-patiently put the stogie in it. Grand X pretended to puff it. AR elements aided this self-deceit. He handed it back, unfulfilled, but his point made. "That's the first mistake you always make is trying to be nice."

TC burst out laughing, clapping his hands and prehensile feet. Grand X handed him the remaining beverages that Hector had jettisoned, instructed him briefly on how to consume them, then left the AGI to experience the miracle of biomass while he tried to rationalize things to his partner. Occasionally, Xutuulu Grandwrath was forced into The Lead. He didn't like it but he wore it with dignity.

"We went into Noctis City after we backed up," he said...

*We had the House drop us off outside what you called 'surveillance range' of Noctis-Quinjao--*



--it's (SEE-an HI-oh)--

--so we could get a Nanofabber. You had decided we'd graduated to the point where we needed one. Your idea was to contact the Nanofabber Underground. It was a good idea. In concept. So we did what we always do. We went freerunning.

The Grand X was not fond of The City. He was not fond of Any City. No matter what he did to his ladder, the Hypercorp stink was always more than he could bare. Everyone else made excuses to come to grips with it. He put up with Rolando DeLaxie to avoid it. It was a very small price, which didn't seem so bad from the rooftops as they bounded on long-legged morphs between gaps and over different obstacles of the Martian sprawl. Rolando never broke out ahead, only increasing the number of asinine tricks he could achieve if he took the lead, which he did for a moment, surely increasing their social capital, but he stopped with a skid and said "do you see that?"

"I don't see it," said X.

"Follow me," said Rolando, who followed an AR trail over and through every obstacle in the NQ dome until it led to a small shack.

"Whoever did this was trying to delay us so they could get away," Lando reassured himself. "This is some tricky shit. Whoever owned this place is half-crazed."

*We took an ecto from the scene. Meanwhile in the city, TC was trying to find himself.*

The entity who believed its name was Tetsuo weaved calculatedly through the crowd. Just this maneuver was incredibly taxing. Dodge obstacles. But do it like Transhumans do. Bumping into others sometimes...but not every time. Transhumans sometimes run into each other, so he was careful to do this. He took a particular distraction as a reason to collide briefly with a corner.

A case morph in the crowd erupted briefly into color and smart materials. A message came through in the pattern.

--You wanted me to warn you if it was still unsafe.--

The figure danced into the clanking squishing multitude.

TC36 weighed the situation and decided to accept this at face value for now and about-faced

*So after running to some remote rooftop you determined the ecto was attached to--oh my!--a projector! And we had to go back to where we found it, because that was where it was set up to project. And it projected notes about some secret Martian police, and several redacted notes obviously made by you. You never asked me the best thing about being an Ultimate, but I swear, no matter what, the top perk of all is not being you! We finally found our contact at some point. Which was Po, so...you know."*

When Rolando Delaxie and Xutuulu Grandwrath came upon the noodle shop that supposedly housed Po's 'cousin' 'Po,' things were already out of hand.

Pressed back-to-the-wall to the outside doorjam under an awning, the two cypriots ran the hostile conversation through their translators.

“Po”: [CANTON CHINESE] “You pigs are just in here harassing me again!”

“NQLEO1”: [MANDARIN CHINESE] “We know you’ve been tapping brownstock lines, Po.”

“Po”: [CC] “Eating shit isn’t a crime!”

“We need to put a stop to this,” said Rolando DeLaxie.

“If we fight them we’ll be liable,” reminded Grand X, punching his palm anyway. “We could ask Dos Leches.”

“We could ask Dos Leches.” Rolando put two fingers behind his ear, and X craned his neck to keep a lookout.

Shortly theater there was a thumping of bass. Then a crashing of obnoxious neo-industrial music. Around the corner, something joined the strident music in real space, then another. To the beat of speakers fiber-taped to their backs, two identical Griefers leapt to and fro over the street, landing on municipal structures such as lamp posts, and smashing them with bats. Scurrying ineffectually after them on the ground, three NQPD officers in octagonal white hats and ear hoods shouted up at them in Mandarin, pointing batons.

But the exchange inside Po’s noodle shop continued.

“Po”: [CC] “What the hell is that?”

“NQLEO1”: [MC] “Don’t worry about that.”

*“That’s not the beginning!”*

Everyone at the space nook looked at TC36.

“What?” Said Grand X quickly.

“First he went in the tank!” Said TC.

“Yeah?” Rolando said.

“Yeah,” nodded TC. “You came out with the Satan Voice.”

Jimothy nodded too. “The Satan Voice.”

“Then you met the Sick Guys!” Chirped TC.

“Damn it!” Said X. “I’m telling this story! How in red hell do you know about the Sick Guys?”

“The Sick Guys?” Said Lando and Jimothy. They looked at each other.

“I was watching through the tacnet!” Said TC. “They were on the bridge! The Sick Guys!”

“Tell me about the Sick Guys,” Rolando goaded.

“No,” said Grand X.

TC spat out more fluid as if he was finally getting the hang of being a breather. “First you climbed out and said, in the Satan Voice...”

“...we’re going into town to get something to eat,” Rolando muttered, his accent missing, wrung out radio-rich and cyanide-smooth. Drops of vat fluid ran off his Candybar suit in

bouncing glassy beads. "We're going to go in quiet and have a little chat. We're going to ask nice. Once."

Cybrids as morphs were rather plain, compensated for by modularity and customization options, so customers who wanted options involving interpersonal appeal had to make due with color-changing, glowing irises, an infamous "look behind the eyes," but mostly the voice modulator. Grand X had socket-wrenched Rolando's ladder to be more persuasive today. Which meant he was going to talk like a hangman for the foreseeable future. Even X hated the Satan Voice. Even though he knew Rolando was slower in this configuration. It meant he intended to threaten people.

"The Fabber Underground is both criminal and anarchist. They're taking a huge risk. Grand X and I are going to make contact with Criminal elements. TC and Hector are going to make contact with Barsoomian elements. No violence. We want to make a deal. They will want something in return. I'll secure us a place to stay for a few days. Listen. We have a lot of social capital. Let's use it. And one other thing. TC."

The AGI blinked.

"I told you I had good news. Tetsuo headquarters is in Noctis City. Take a look in on it."

TC36 brightened.

The House stopped with a discharge of brake gas and CFCs and the ramp bumped to the red soil and they trotted out into the sprawl...

"--what about the fucking Sick Guys?" said Rolando.

Grand X facepalmed with a loud 'clack.'

"Well something important happened before that," said TC.

"I'm confused," said Jimothy.

Grand X tapped the side of his head audibly. "So are we. Memory edits will do that."

"You get used to it," said Lando, "just relax and tell me about the Sick Guys. Then tell me the Important Thing later."

"Jesus," said Grand X.

"Well we split up and to get to Po's noodle place, you had to cross the NQ bridge, and there were these people there..."

"...I said, 'spare a few brics, mister?'" said the Ruster, stopping in front of Grand X. She was dirty. Her clothes had to have been fabricated over a week ago and never witnessed any sort of hygenic attention. Rolando sauntered on ahead, smirking, leaving the grown Xutuulu to take care of himself. He handed her a Candybar from his jacket pocket. The nanites in his suit set to work sequencing a new one from his skin flakes, waste...

"No, mister," said the indent, taking the food anyway and biting into it. "I need *rubricks* for medicine. The heavy metals an' that from the reactors is making us sick."

She was a part of a small shanty that had formed on the Noctis side of the bridge. Most of them weren't as merlot as they should be. Some had blisters on their faces. "You got the rot, congratulations,"

"I don't got the rot! I work for Janowitz, they gave me a clean one! It's the industrial contam-nimnans! We all do!"

Grand stopped. A lot of them had jackets with Janowitz logo patches. Indentures. "I'm a doctor," he sighed, and the woman immediately opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue.

"You were doing charity work?" said Rolando. He backhanded Grand X's shoulder, and received a similar blow back, both biffing off the graphene lattice of their uniforms.

"Yeah, he did a bunch of tests on 'em," said TC, peeking into the bottle with one eye, then squirting himself and wailing. "Oww! Anyway he said they had all the symptoms of GRM rot but none of them believed they had it. Their microcorp is saddling them bum morphs as shiny ones and letting 'em just...you know, expire, then they sell 'em 'medicine.' You checked with Firewall, immediately suspected a huge scandal, but it turns out..."

"...this is just another bad thing Transhumans do to each other," said DEMETREOS, or rather his muse translated from Octopattern. It appeared as a cuttlefish in the shadow of an extremely large mythological-looking black octopus, speaking in shifting shades of purple. The Contract Judge logo glowed on its mantle but the rest was nebulous and unknowable. "Not sporting. But definitively not an X-threat."

"Great," Rolando crooned.

Grand X was receiving the call but said nothing, looking over blisters and pockmarks that were designed to encourage lepers to find money quickly and get their faces back...

"There is very little that can be done about it legally," said DEMETREOS' other muse, his operations complicated enough to necessitate more than one to carry his several skillsofts, this one appearing as an awkward dumbo octopus. It fluttered its earfins. "It is part of the larger hypercorp problem."

"There kind of is something we can do," purred Rolando. "In fact we do it all the time."

"Something illegal?" Said Grand X.

"Not even really that. One of our operations has been jailbreaking ladders. If they have GRM rot, we can treat GRM rot."

Grand X hung his head. They were about to Get Involved.

"The Medellin gang, the South American cartels, a lot of them did charity work to improve their image with the press, it happens all the time. Could increase our social capital," tempted Rolando.

"You wanna take 'em all to the truck?" said X.

"Oh we don't have to do that," said Lando. "I just have to make some calls."

"This becomes important later," said Jimothy. "You made a few moderate connections and got the necessary 36 hours of healing vat time for a gaggle of indentures as well as a hideout across the street."

"Nnnnyeah," said TC distractedly, still not having learned his lesson and squirting himself in the eye with his beverage again. "Half the story basically took place in the pod brothel."

"Redeye's?" Said Rolando. "We herded a mob of clarets into a cybergump?"

Grand X nodded miserably. "We even, hired a pod doc to finish the process so we could go out again."

The pod! Madam was actually taller than Rolando and almost as tall as Grand X. Behind her the healing vat, a very nice one, was to be occupied by three rusters at a time to illegally jailbreak their morphs. The pod doctor had been expecting something exciting and rather dismally set a routine in motion that took very little attention once the formula was encoded. Around her sat various red people hugging their knees against the wall or crowded on a piece of furniture where supplies lasted. Some were excited. Some were bored. All seemed to be behaving.

"Thanks," said Rolando. "Really."

"Don't mention it," said the Madam. "Ever." She closed the curtain.

"Why'd you goad me into that?" said Grand X.

"It annoys people we hate," said Rolando. "Let's get some noodles."