

Picking Up The Pieces

Initial Brief

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>>> DECRYPTING MESSAGE ... .. DONE
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-----BEGIN ZGP SIGNED MESSAGE-----
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o hai

so the orion gates been down, liek, forever. and clearly aspexx havent done anything about it. WHAT DONT THEY WANT US TO KNOW?!?!?!?

well, i say its time to find out >>:D got my mitts on SO MUCH data these last few weeks. security footage. log entries. schematics. the works. aSpExX sErVeRs ArE sO sEcUrE lol

its to much data to go through manually BUT ive run it thru my holodeck extrapoliser and its made this sick immersive sim out of it. real talk: it shud be pretty dam true-to-life.

TLDR: im looking for a group of BRAVE ADVENTURES to explore the sim and come back with the juicy deets! were gonna bust this WIDE OPEN. the truth is OUT THERE.

hit me up on aceworld, coordinates enclosed.

// z3r0 h1d1ng

PS i will be vetting applicants. no aspexx stooges. opsec iz srs bsns

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-----BEGIN ZGP SIGNATURE-----
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Tm90aGluZyB0byBzZWUgaGVyZS4gTm8sIHNlcmlvdXNseSwgbm90aGluZyB0byBzZWUgaGVyZS4gVGHlIFBsYW5ldGZhbGwgR01zIGFyZSBvbm5IHByZXBhcmVkiHRvIGdvIHNVIGZhciB0byBjcmVhdGUgYSBzZW1pLXJlYWxpc3RpYyBkaWdpdGFsIHNPZ25hdHVyZS4gQmUgb2ZmIHdpdGggeW91Lg==
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-----END ZGP SIGNATURE-----
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Characters

- [Budding Leaf](#) - Alex
- [Tiny Ember](#) - Iain
- [Gathering Flow](#) - Phil

Summary

- The party arrives at the coordinates on Ace's World given by Zero Hiding, which turns out to be a back alley in the settlement of Mucker's Grind. Here they find a solitary robot, which turns out to be a proxy for their employer - Zero did not want to broadcast their actual location, but has been monitoring the party as they approach and is satisfied that they can be trusted. While

hurriedly guiding them to her hideout with the proxy robot for a full briefing, she explains that before anything else she needs the party's help: having taken delivery of a 'mission critical item' from a group of bandits, the bandits are now demanding more payment than initially agreed, and are trying to break down her door!

- Following the robot to a residential area, the party indeed find a group of bandits trying to break down a door. After proving unpersuadable from a legal perspective, the bandits are beaten down, but then healed and allowed to flee. Zero Hiding emerges, and beckons the party inside.
- While Tiny Ember repairs the door, Zero explains that she has gathered a large cache of data pertaining to the Orion Gate Incident, which is too large to interrogate manually. To this end she has fed it into her holodeck to form a simulation of the Orion Gate in the days and hours leading up to the Incident, which she wants the party to explore in order to search for clues. The party have many questions about the operation of holodecks, their safety, and the etymology of the word 'meatverse', which Zero is happy to answer, before getting them hooked into the equipment.
- Before the simulation can begin, Zero needs to feed the extra data from the data drive delivered by the bandits into the simulation, as this is meant to contain pertinent data. In the meantime, to give the party some practice with the holodeck, and definitely not because she is an obsessive fan, Zero loads up her save of 'Overworld' - a game she's been playing recently. You see, it's got *really deep lore* and you can form *such emotional connections* with the characters and it's *really meta* and okay Zero may have done one playthrough making friends with the characters and now a second playthrough where she sees what happens if you kill them all but you *have to try this...*
- The party finds themselves in a fantasy-styled forest, and meets a squad of skeleton guards led by a skeleton calling himself Wingding. Wingding figures that the party were sent by Zero, the fiend who has been laying waste to their land, and attacks the party. Despite a valiant effort by Tiny Ember to make friends with the skeleton, Wingding is 'too smart' to 'fall for this fiendish trickery', and the party are forced to fight back. The defeated Wingding's head pops off, which the party attempt to reattach, but Wingding nonetheless disintegrates into bone dust.
- Another skeleton arrives, who introduces himself as Impact, Wingding's brother. Discovering what the party have done, he begins to attack the party, while refusing to take any damage. Before this can escalate any further, Zero pauses the game - the Orion Gate simulation is now ready, and Zero loads it up.
- The party begins in a transport carriage designed to take Aspexx staff into the Orion Gate station interior. However, since the party's meatverse appearances have carried over and none of them are affiliated with Aspexx, a second carriage filled with Aspexx soldiers is sent to intercept them. A protracted firefight is avoided when Gathering Flow uses an overloaded airblast to push most of the soldiers out of their moving carriage to fall into the tunnel. Zero doesn't want to risk destabilising the simulation by hacking in disguises for the party, but is able to apply what she calls an 'aura of plausible deniability' to each party member, meaning that so long as they don't do anything overtly suspicious, no-one will question their right to be there from here on out.
- The transport carriage brings the party to the station cafeteria, where they join the station staff for lunch. Zero indicates that although the staff are simulated, the input data to the simulation contained a wealth of information on the staff's backgrounds and day-to-day activities, so ought to be high fidelity enough to make talking to them worthwhile. The party get to know them and subtly pump them for information over food. Broadly speaking, everything seems perfectly normal on the station from the perspective of the staff. The party does pick up on a few items of interest however: no staff are aware of any Ship Heart Mystics on the station, despite the presence of a Ship Heart, and some staff are convinced of a conspiracy theory about 'crawlers'

that live in the vents. Tiny Ember tinkers with their communicator to allow an additional connection, and uses this to establish a link with one of the staff, Charismatic Wheelhouse.

- The cafeteria closes, and the party exits into a corridor to make a plan. Tiny Ember commandeers a control terminal and confirms that the station believes all systems are nominal, so there is no risk of imminent explosion. According to the map, although the simulation appears to have built a reasonable facsimile of the layout of the Orion Gate interior, it has also laid out a reasonably linear path for the party to follow through it. Fortunately this looks like it goes through most of the locations that the party wishes to visit based on the discussions they had with the staff about day-to-day station life.
- Proceeding further down the corridor, the party is suddenly set upon by black-cloaked figures that burst from the vents. The figures glitch about slightly, giving the party a tough fight; one of them escapes. Once defeated, the party examine the cloaks, but find them empty of any bodies. They feed this information back to Zero to see if she can do a targeted search of the input data based on this information, who reports back that a black-cloaked figure appears in exactly one piece of security footage in a somewhat indistinct fashion. The party surmises that the black-cloaked figure did exist, but that the simulation may have combined this with the staff rumours of 'crawlers' in the vents. Zero sets various other long-running search queries on the data going, and the party proceed.
- The corridor leads to the 'Auxiliary Power Station', which appears to be functioning normally. Upon examining the control panels, it appears to be producing enough power to run the entire station, barring the Gate itself for which the power requirements are unknown to the party. This might be considered odd, since usually a non-negligible proportion of a station's power might come from its Ship Heart, and this station is labelled as 'auxiliary'. In one corner, several wall panels have been pulled back, revealing a crawl space into which power cables go, and Budding Leaf spots some torn black cloth on one of the panels.
- Picking their way through the crawl space, the party find a substantial number of health and safety violations - there is exposed wiring everywhere. Examining a junction box and tracing the connections, the party concludes that no station systems are drawing suspiciously too much or too little power, although the power for more-or-less the entire station is indeed flowing through here. Some of the wiring relating to the 'Information Security' sector appears to be potentially faulty, though not through and obvious sabotage. The party note these as potential leads, especially if a black-cloaked figure came through here, and Tiny Ember theorises that the real Orion Gate might not have had wiring in such a dire state as the simulation probably only had maintenance reports to work from when building this area.
- The crawl space leads to a spaceship hangar, in which one ship is docked and two ships have been impounded by station security. The cargo door of one of the impounded ships bursts open, releasing an angry pack of Raktors, which the party fights off. Examining a computer terminal, the party learn some information about the ships - though some information is also missing, seemingly due to the lax and lazy administrative practices of the station security staff. The ships are:
 - Peace Lily - a small cargo vessel with a small crew (led by one Constant Lift) from Mytene that appeared to be trying to smuggle Raktors to the Fjenix System.
 - Pulsar Drift - a shuttle from the Starlight Ebbing that docked at the Orion Gate after a visit to Luckworth on Ace's World, carrying a single unidentified passenger and no cargo.
 - H4 Breaker - a medium passenger vessel belonging to Keter Holiday Tours, which travelled from the Fjenix System heading for Siruta, but was impounded after travelling through the gate due to a passenger of interest to the Altarian authorities.
- After taking notes on all the ships and directing Zero to save this data, the party proceed into the most central part of the station interior. Before they realise it, their surroundings have become intensely dreamlike and ill-defined, and the party find themselves in a large room containing several people. The people appear to be mostly metaphorical, however: a central

figure appears to represent the Gate and/or the Gate's Ship Heart, while many others represent ships transiting between the Keter and Fjenix systems, moved by the central figure. There is also an elderly figure who appears to be a Mystic, but does not seem to engage with the Ship Heart much if at all - indeed, they warn the party that communicating with the Ship Heart is forbidden.

- Nonetheless, Tiny Ember attempts to communicate with the Ship Heart. This initially seems to succeed, though the usefulness of the response is unclear given that simulation seems to lack the data to portray this area accurately. However, suddenly the scene bends and rewinds, and the party finds themselves back where they started in the strange room, with all the metaphorical people rewound back to their initial state; the party remember what has passed but are filled with a strange cursed sensation. Tiny Ember makes two further attempts, but the overall result is the same - the simulation is rewound, and the party are triply cursed.
- While this is ongoing, Gathering Flow finds that their comms line to Zero has gone silent, though their connection to the Endeavour Ship Heart remains active. Budding Leaf and Tiny Ember attempt to contact their respective contacts aboard ships via the link to the real world, but pick up too much interference. The party becomes increasingly concerned by these developments.
- Eventually, the strange room collapses around them, placing the party in a more reasonable simulation of what could plausibly be the entrance to the Gate's Ship Heart chamber. A single black-cloaked figure stands before them, which the party quickly despatch. At this point, the simulation starts to collapse around them entirely, and wave after wave of rooms and creatures encountered earlier in the simulation assail the party: Raktors, then electrical cables that resurrect the Raktors, then vent-crawling black-cloaked figures, then the staff from the cafeteria (non-hostile but terrified and confused), then Aspexx soldiers on a transport carriage...
- And then the 'Overworld' forest bleeds in, including some skeleton guards. Though Wingding does not return, Impact does. Once again seeking retribution for the fate of his brother, and possessing some level of meta-knowledge about the simulation, Impact tricks Budding Leaf into receiving a curse before laying into the party. Before either Impact can wipe them out or the party can figure out how to land a hit on him, the entire holodeck disengages.
- Coming to, the party finds themselves in heavily damaged remains of Zero's holodeck (which Gathering Flow confirms is indeed the real world), surrounded by several Aspexx soldiers and representatives of ACE, who between them appear to be responsible for the damage. Zero is unconscious but alive. Aspexx appears to want to get control of their massive information leak, while ACE simply seeks to retrieve the item delivered by the bandits, who they had tracked in order to locate Zero's hideout. A tense negotiation ensues, with the party, Aspexx, and ACE all having competing demands. Negotiations end when one of the Aspexx soldiers threatens to execute Zero unless the party cooperate; the ACE representatives turn on Aspexx and the Aspexx soldiers are defeated.

Aftermath

Consequences

The World

- Consequences

All Characters

- Consequences

Budding Leaf

- Consequences

Tiny Ember

- Consequences

Gathering Flow

- Consequences

[mission](#), [budding leaf](#), [tiny ember](#), [gathering flow](#)

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