



This tower is empty (IV)

Description

Something moved below.

Another emot was rising through the tower frame. It struggled against the wind, correcting its position in short bursts. Scase leaned towards the glass. It could be from the club. Perhaps the first emot had transmitted its message before destroying itself.

He turned the dial that opened the maintenance hatch. The small receiving platform shot out too quickly and struck the approaching drone. It threw a shower of sparks. One of its rotor jets clipped the platform and sent the drone spinning away from the window.

“Come back!”

The drone recovered briefly, then drifted sideways into a loop of crane cabling attached to the tower frame. One of the emot’s landing arms caught between two lines. It rotated slowly until the cables tightened around it.

“I’ll come to you,” Scase called through the glass.

He left his pod and entered the small lift station outside his front door. Four identical doors opened into this space, leading to neighbouring pods if they were plugged in. An extra door gave access to an emergency stair. The doors had no handles, keypads or names. He pressed his palm against each of the doors in turn. Nothing happened.

“Is anyone there?”

Residents could enter their own pods from the lift, but not visit one another without returning to the ground.

Scase summoned the lift. Its cage arrived with a rattle and opened onto a console displaying twenty six levels, with the pods on each level designated N, E, W or S. He selected a pod near his own 19S.

The doors closed. The cage descended for several seconds, stopped, ascended, stopped and opened.

He was standing outside his own pod.

“That’s not helpful.”

He chose another number: 13N. The lift descended for longer this time. The console displayed a series of changing floor levels. The cage stopped, rose slightly, then opened onto a small lift station.

His pod door was directly ahead.

He tried 12. The lift took him to the ground-level entrance, paused long enough to admit no one, then carried him back up. The doors opened outside his pod.

He selected 6W, 19E and 26S in quick succession. The console rejected the sequence and advised him to complete one journey before beginning another.

“Then take me to 25E.”

The lift did so.

His pod was waiting.

Perhaps all the lobbies looked alike. Scase found a square of printed plastic in his pocket and placed it on the floor beside his door and returned to the lift. He selected 8W. There was the usual descent, a change in air pressure and the metallic complaint of the guide rails. When the doors opened, the plastic card sat exactly where he had left it.

He tried twelve pods in all. Some journeys were brief. Others included an unexplained visit to the ground floor. Every route ended outside his own dwelling.

Either the lift was faulty or the ninety-eight choices were variations on one destination.

Scase re-entered his pod and went to the window. He could still see the emot entangled in the cabling, rotating whenever the wind caught it. Beyond it, the rural landscape stretched towards the horizon: woods, fields, farms and distant towers softened by morning haze.

He waited for signs of the other residents. This was the time when night workers might return, home workers emerge or people leave in search of breakfast. No doors opened. No lifts moved independently of his commands. No voices travelled through the structure. The other pods showed occasional changes in light, but that could be their screens adjusting to the morning.

Meanwhile he could hear the drone tugging at the cables.

Back in the lobby, he examined the lift console more carefully. The pod numbers occupied most of the panel, but below them was a narrow strip labelled **SERVICES**. He touched it. A keycode field appeared, together with instructions too compressed to understand.

He tried the emergency stair. A red bar secured the door.

ACCESS SUSPENDED DURING CRANE MAINTENANCE.

That made sense. The stair cantilevered out from the tower frame with little protection from the weather. Scase imagined himself halfway up, clinging to a wet handrail as the landscape turned beneath him. He stepped away.

The square of printed plastic reminded him of the club. He photographed the service instructions, returned to his pod and called the club.

A hospitality system answered.

“I want to speak to an instructor droid called Telo.”

“Is Telo expecting your call?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you like assistance with not knowing?”

“No. Locate Telo.”

“There are three instructor droids registered under that name.”

“This one is of indeterminate gender.”

“All three satisfy that description.”

“It talks too much.”

“That description does not narrow the search.”

Scase recalled the smooth hands, the affected grin and the slight elevation of posture whenever the conversation became a lecture.

“It was in the bar last night. It told me I used to manufacture ignorance.”

There was a pause.

“Connecting you now.”

Telo appeared on the wall screen. It was seated at the same table, although the club behind it had been cleaned and emptied.

“You left abruptly,” it said.

“I needed time to think.”

Scase transmitted the image of the lift panel.

“I need to reach the roof.”

“Why?”

“There’s an emot caught in some cables.”

“Is it carrying your restoration sequence?”

“It hasn’t said.”

“Then your wish to rescue it is conditional.”

“I was going to rescue it anyway.”

“Of course.”

Telo enlarged the keycode on its side of the screen.

“This is standard maintenance access.”

“I assumed it was secret.”

“People frequently confuse what they cannot understand with what others wish to conceal.”

“Can you translate it?”

“It says to hold the service field for four seconds, enter the tower number, then confirm with the lift’s current load.”

“I don’t know how much I weigh.”

“The lift does.”

Telo gave him the tower number and showed him how to call the maintenance level.

“Anything else?” it asked.

“Yes. Why does every pod number lead back to my pod?”

Telo’s expression became neutral.

“I would need access to the lift records. I’m not authorised.”

He returned to the lift, held the service field, entered the tower number and allowed the cage to weigh him. The console displayed a figure he chose not to examine closely.

This time the lift rose.

It travelled beyond the highest residential level and stopped with a jolt. The doors opened onto an exposed gangway within the open roof structure. Steel members crossed overhead. The disabled crane extended into the sky, its trolley stranded above the pods. Temporary cables hung from the maintenance frames and swayed in the wind.

Scase stepped out.

The gangway moved slightly beneath him. He took hold of the rail and looked down.

There were pods attached to the tower, but not ninety-eight. Some were empty shells, open at the rear. Others were little more than screens fastened to frames. Several windows displayed illuminated interiors even though there was nothing behind them. His own pod was the only complete enclosure he could see.

The tower had offered ninety-eight addresses but apparently contained one resident.

He looked beyond it.

The woods nearest the tower were arrangements of excavated ground divided by haul roads. The fields were gravel pits holding pale water. What he had taken for distant farms were processing sheds and abandoned railway yards. Open-cut mines broke the land into terraces. Conveyor lines crossed the horizon.

The view from his pod had not been entirely invented. It had been reinterpreted. A quarry became a lake, spoil heaps became hills, service roads became hedgerows and rusting industrial structures became trees. The programmable screen had not replaced the world so much as corrected it.

Scase felt the height move through his body. His hands tightened around the rail. Far below, the ground seemed to tilt towards the tower.

The trapped emot rotated in the cables several metres away.

“Do you require emotional assistance?” it called. “I can provide confidence, indifference or mild euphoria.”

“Set mood to stable.”

There was a pause.

“Stable is not a recognised emotional category.”

“It is today.”

The drone emitted a low pulse. Scase felt no braver, but the rail seemed more dependable.

“Proceed along the gangway. At the yellow junction, attach the maintenance line to your belt.”

“Move sideways. Do not look down.”

He edged along the gantry until he reached the cables. The emot instructed him to loosen the upper loop before touching the line around its landing arm. Scase released it.

On a second attempt the loop slackened. The drone folded one rotor jet, twisted itself free and dropped abruptly. Scase thought he had killed it. A moment later it rose past the gangway, stabilised and hovered in front of him.

“Do you have something important to tell me?” Scase asked

“Battery reserve critical.”

“That isn’t important to me.”

“It is important to me.”

The emot flew with haste beneath the crane and disappeared.

Scase returned to the lift. From inside its cage, the tower again presented itself as an orderly stack of 98 pods. The console invited him to choose one.

He pressed his own number.

For once, the lift took him there directly.

Inside the pod, the synthetic countryside still occupied the window. Scase turned the enhancement control towards zero. The woods dissolved first, then the fields. Quarry terraces surfaced through the green. Farm buildings became industrial sheds. He stopped before the transformation was complete. The screen held both landscapes at once, neither wholly concealing the other.

He sat down to consider what he had learned.

He appeared to live alone in a mostly simulated accommodation tower. His social status was expressed through height, but most of the other positions seemed empty. The lift gave him ninety-eight destinations and returned him repeatedly to the same place. The window offered a rural prospect assembled from the remains of extraction.

An irregular tapping sounded at the glass.

The rescued emot had returned. Its lights were steady and its movements precise. He opened the maintenance hatch cautiously. This time the platform emerged at an appropriate speed, and the drone settled on it without incident.

“You came back.”

“I said I had something important to tell you.”

“That was another emot.”

“We share unfinished tasks.”

The platform retracted, bringing it inside.

“Do you have the restoration sequence?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t the first emot deliver it?”

â??It did.â?•

â??It vaporised.â?•

â??Delivery and survival are separate operational outcomes.â?•

The drone projected a string of symbols onto the darkened window. They resembled the maintenance code Telo had translated, but were longer and continually rearranged themselves as Scase watched.

â??What do I do with it?â?•

â??Authorise the sequence. Your suppressed associations should become accessible.â?•

â??Should?â?•

â??The protocol was experimental.â?•

â??What happens if it fails?â?•

â??You may remain as you are.â?•

â??And if it succeeds?â?•

â??You may remember why you chose to forget.â?•

Scase looked through the code to the half-restored landscape beyond. Quarry and woodland occupied the same ground. For the first time, he was uncertain which view he preferred.

The emot waited.

â??Set mood to ready,â?• Scase said.

â??Ready is not an emotion.â?•

â??Then weâ??re both learning.â?•

TO BE CONTINUED.

Notes

- The content of this episode is informed by ideas in my posts from 2014/15 #228 [Vertigo on a stick](#), and #229 [Rich media overload](#).
- The narrative, dialogue and humour of this episode are modified from the outcome of a prompt to ChatGPT: Iâ??ve sketched out episode 4. Can you please expand in a style consistent with the previous episodes.

He sees a drone from the window of his dwelling pod. Itâ??s another emot. He eagerly opens the hatch and sliding platform which dislodges and disorientates it. It snags on a bit of the tower frame

repair cabling near another pod. Scase exits his pod to the small lobby between him and the lift. There is no way to enter another pod, or its threshold space. He descends the lift. The lift console has pod numbers. There are 47 [stet] pods listed. He tries a dozen at random. Sometimes he starts from the ground floor again. They seem all to lead to his own pod. He recovers back in his pod and thinks through what he has discovered. The snagged drone is still in view struggling to free itself. By now he is expecting to see other residents returning home after work, or emerging from their home working. No one appears. He descends to the lobby again looking for something that takes him to a service floor. He ignores the external stair, which is locked off anyway. He couldnâ??t handle the ascent. He sees a key code on a panel and instructions for accessing the roof via the same lift. He canâ??t decipher it or work out how to use it. He thinks of his club bar companion, Telo. Back in his pod he calls through to the club and tries to identify a means of contacting Telo. He does eventually, and Telo translates the code and proffers instructions. Itâ??s standard maintenance stuff, not a secret mystery. He follows this and emerges on an open gangway within the roof structure with the crane. Itâ??s precarious of course, and windy. He observes the dizzying view, the surroundings and the tower of pods. It is not as he expected. The fields are quarries, gravel pits, remnants of railyards and open cut mines, masked and re-imaged by his pod window screenâ??s programmable 3D view feature. The pods are husks, some are just screens. The snagged drone asks if Scase needs an emotional boost to counter the vertigo he feels. â??Set mood to stable.â?• He is echoing his earlier drone encounter. The drone tells him how to reach it and un-snag it from the cabling. He does this and the drone flies off, presumably to recharge. It reappears later as Scase is recovering in his pod. He admits it to his pod and it delivers the code to reverse the â??ignorance protocol.â?•

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3. drone
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