

LIMB AWAY 7: TESTING PROTOCOLS

by Paul Watson

The lab at Limb Away, it's formerly polished floors now scuffed, rings of coffee stains, papers and the other detritus of life starting to appear on the previously pristine, gleaming surfaces. Jennifer and Loretta sit next to each other, hands entwined, Jennifer blushing. Hank hunches forward over an empty hand sanitiser, carefully decanting Limb Ahoy into it. Doctor Harrison stands at the whiteboard, scrawling progresses, failures and new ideas. Brad is nowhere in sight.

"Right. No point waiting for Mr Hemmings. He'll turn up when he turns up. Miss Henriquez, how goes your research?"

"Well, sir, we've managed to get both Ahoy and Away to infuse with the wipes so there's a cleaner way of applying them. So far, the wipes contain enough product to affect one limb."

"Which gives us something more convenient to use and to sell."

"Well done. That should give some good news to Ms Sripathakan. And the other?"

"Oh. S-still nothing. Using Limb Away reduces each l-limb separately but there's no join."

Loretta wipes some pink gel across their hands to demonstrate resulting in two arms ending at the wrist but very much separate.

"Thank you for the demonstration, Miss James. Is this likely to be a productive line of..."

The door swings open.

"Thank you for finally joining us, Mr Hemmings. Just to remind you, the work hours are not option..."

"Yeah, yeah, Doc. Come in."

A pale blonde walks in, her eyes glassy, staring straight ahead, her hands by her side, a short dress more suited to a party than a laboratory clinging to her.

"Mr Hemmings, what are you..."

"Well, for one thing, Doc, I can confirm that the gel pen works, so you can tick it off your list. Also, fucking with two dicks is awesome and I still say we should market..."

"Mr Hemmings! You know perfectly well what I was referring to. Who is that and what is she..."

Hemmings smiles, "Everyone, this is Drone. She's signed up to be our test subject, haven't you, Drone?"

"This drone has signed up to be a test subject." she replies monotonously.

"Mr Hemmings, an explanation, if you please. Now!"

"Jeez, Doc, keep your hair on." he sits down. Drone remains standing rigidly. "So, you know what happens when you Away someone's head?"

"I am familiar with my own work, yes."

"Well, with Drone..."

"That's not her real name, is it?"

"She's Drone. We're not going to use her 'dead name' You of all people should be against that, 'Loretta'."

Loretta bristles and starts to rise up from her seat..

"Pardon my ignorance, but she appears remarkably alive to me."

"That's...not what dead name means, Doc. It's...it's your old name, but it's not you any more so it's dead and buried."

"So like Dennis..."

"Yes, Doc," she replies with resigned irritation, "exactly like that."

"Anyway, with Drone, I was very careful and awayed her head but so it was like an empty bowl."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll show you, Hank." He reaches for a pair of gloves."Drone, come here, turn around and kneel." Drone follows those instructions without comment, kneeling on the floor, her head just higher than the counter top. Brad dips his finger into the pink cream and rubs it across her scalp, melting it away, revealing an empty, skin-covered vacancy inside her head. "There. See? She was a bit of an airhead beforehand and now she really is."

“And how does that explains her current...attitude?”

“She's got no brain so no higher functions. Whatever Away does to keep things working when they vanish works a little less well on the ol' grey matter. She can process sensory input, and follow commands, but there's no one in there and she can't reason. It's probably only made a marginal decrease in her brainpower to be honest. She wasn't exactly Einstein to begin with.”

Hank walks around the table, putting his hand into her empty head, “Why doesn't this happen when you away her whole head?”

“It probably does.”

“Believe me, Mr Hemmings, awaying someone's head does not make them docile robots.”

“Sure, Doc, sure, but that's because there's no way to give them commands. No ears. Whereas Drone has ears and so can process her orders.”

“Are you proposing to research a way of inputting commands to those with awayed heads, Mr Hemmings?”

“You said it, Doc, not me.”

“And she signed the form?”

“Of course. What do you take me for?”

Loretta raises her manicured eyebrow, “Before she was Drone?”

“Drone. Did you fill in the form?”

“Yes.”

“See?”

“Drone,” Loretta tries, “did you fill in the form before you were Drone?”

“Before? This drone does not understand.”

“Before you were Drone, who were you?”

“This drone is Drone.”

“Like I said, she can't reason. Simple commands and concepts only.”

“You can't expect us to believe that...”

“You calling me a liar, 'Loretta'?! ”

“If the cap fits...”

“Will you all please be quiet?! This is a laboratory not a bar!”

The door opens, “I'm not disturbing anything, am I?” Angelica ask, “Only these walls are pretty thin and you guys are being pretty...hello, who's this? I don't remember Marcy saying we had new recruits already.”

“That's Drone.”

“Drone? Riiiiight.”

“She signed the form. And she's signed this one for longer testing.”

Angelica takes the forms, “Uh-huh, uh-huh. They look the same. So, Drone, what did Hemmings say to say if we asked about these?”

“Hey!”

“This drone is to say 'This drone does not understand.' to any question about its signatures except from its owner.”

“That's not what...”

“Oh, Brad, what are we going to do with you?”

“You...”

“That was rhetorical, Brad. Drone, could you repeat what Brad did to you on someone else?”

“Yes.”

“Could you repeat it on him if you were told to?”

“Yes.” she replies as emotionlessly as all her answers have been.

Angelica smiles down at Brad. “I think you'd really like to put her brain back where it should be. Don't you, Brad? Before you get yourself any deeper in trouble.”

“You can't intimidate...”

“Brad, Brad, Brad, I know you're used to easily manipulating people, but that was academia, this is corporate and you are a very small fish here. Now, you're supposed to be smart so I hope you're

smart enough to figure out just a few of the ways I can absolutely fucking ruin your life. And if you think I won't, well, call my bluff. I dare you. I double dare you." she stands up straight, "Now, as I said, fix this. Then, Jennifer, you get her back to wherever she should be and make sure she won't sue us or press charges or, worse, go to the press. Doc, we can talk about this later, and the rest of you have work to be doing, I'm sure."

She walks out and closes the door softly. With everyone watching, Brad straightens his shirt and reaches for a pot of blue gel. As her head reappears, Drone blinks.

"What am I doing on the floor?" she looks around, "Where is here? Who are all of you?"

"Miss..."

"I didn't do anything silly, did I?"

"No." Hank helps her up.

"Oh, that's good. I'm always doing something silly."

"Miss..."

"Oh, right, Miss Jacobs. Sindi Jacobs. Two i's so I can see you." she giggles. "So, where did you say I was?"

"You're at Limb Away. Mr Hemmings brought you in with him this morning."

She focuses on him, "Oh, right, the guy from the bar. The one with two dicks." she looks nervously around, "Is it ok if I say that?"

"It's fine."

"Why am I here again?"

"You were still passed out and I didn't want to leave you there. If you woke up all alone, you might have worried."

"Oh, right, that was sweet of you. Wait, Limb Away? Isn't that the place you said made you get me to sign that form? The one about acknowledging that that pink stuff was experimental and all?"

"That's the one."

"Right. That must be why I'm so fuzzy in the head. Well, I think I should be getting home now. It was good to meet you all." she sways slightly as she gets up.

"Ms Henriquez, could you..."

Jennifer nods, moving to help.

"Thanks. You're a sweetie. And your skin is so smooth. You have to tell me how you do it. Is it..."

The door closes. Dr Harrison picks up the second form from the table and tears it in two, staring at Hemmings the whole while.

"Right. I think we'll add 'Drones' to the IIB list." he turns to the whiteboard and the pen squeaks out the letters under a heading of 'Illegal, Immoral, or Both' where it joins such gems as "disappear people", "kidnapping", and "prison overcrowding". "Now, Mr Foster, where have you gotten to?"

Later, in the doorway of a small apartment across town, Sindi hugs Jennifer, who awkwardly responds, thrusting make up into her hands, "You would look so darling. Here, try these. Don't worry, I have loads." she giggles, closing the door. She presses her ear to the door until she's sure Jennifer's gone and then looks in the mirror licking her lips. "Mmmmm. 'This drone' quite enjoyed that."