

# Forsythia Station Incident

Łukasz Woliński

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[www.scifinarratives.com](http://www.scifinarratives.com)

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# Prologue

## Trouble in Paradise?

*Oort News Network, San Francisco, Feb 13th*

Earlier today, Handwavium Corporation CEO Ariadne Fischer announced the new director of the Forsythia Station. Edward, Ariadne's youngest son, will replace Raymond Krumzweil who held this position for the last three years. Ariadne's choice is highly controversial among economic experts who emphasize Edward's lack of experience and reputation of an irresponsible playboy. Some observers question Ariadne's ability to lead the company and even rumours about her being brain-hacked have surfaced. Since Handwavium is the leader in engineering, nanotechnology, robotics and AI – the so-called *Four Horsemen of the Singularity* – all the speculations created a tense situation on the markets. It is believed that...

## Forsythia Station

In this episode of *Awesome Space Structures* we will talk about the Forsythia Station. Handwavium's engineering marvel orbits the Earth-Moon L4 point and boasts a five hundred meter ring rotating with the core. It's managed by a sophisticated AI running on the top-notch quantum mainframe. The station is also home to *Neuron Firing Rate* – a rockband formed by a group of postgraduate students. They play music suited for the unique acoustic conditions of the station.

Some history first. The Forsythia was built in the last decade in spite of the protests of the old-time L4 residents. Some groups, mainly inhabitants of the Chinaski Republic, accuse Handwavium of conducting illegal research and weapon manufacturing. Rumour has it that Chinaskans just want to extort money from the company to repair their aging habitat. Back to the topic...

## Handwavium's Tourist Attraction

*Oort News Network, Luna City, Aug 7th*

In a measure to improve its corporate image, Handwavium is now organizing tours around the Forsythia Station. The company is also hiring a team of media and language specialists to start a new information campaign aimed at...

## Forsythia Station Incident

"That's funny," I say staring at the white ceiling.

"Excuse me?" A pair of blue eyes looks at me.

"The whole thing – travel from Earth to LEO, transfer, journey here, briefing and now I'm going to the freezer. It seems that the more efficient way would be to put me in a cryonic storage down in the well and just haul my frozen ass up here."

The technician has a friendly round face and blonde hair pinned up on top of her head.

"That's how we roll in Handwavium Corporation, Mr. Collins." She smiles. "There are procedures to be followed. Besides that, we couldn't just bring you here in a cryosleep chamber and put it in some storeroom like an ordinary cargo."

Smelling her subtle perfume, I gaze at her light green scrub top.

"So, I'm not an ordinary cargo for you?"

"No, of course not." She laughs. "Your neighbor here," she says and points at the cryochamber on my left, "would confirm that we don't treat anyone like cargo. That's your first contract?"

I look her into eyes. "Yup. I'm new to this business. Up until now I've been only working on Earth."

"Well, you'll get used to it. I hope you'll like your stay on the Forsythia Station. Have good dreams, Mr. Collins."

She steps back and a glass cover closes over me. Not that I had a lot of experience with that, but I still haven't dreamt anything in the freezer. Closing my eyes, I think about the technician's sweet scent.

\* \* \*

When I open my eyes, the technician is gone. Also, only the dim emergency lighting is on but for my military-grade enhanced vision that's more than enough.

"Get up, major." A firm female voice in my head belonging to Alice – the program installed by my employer. Much different than the technician's soft voice.

The glass cover opens and I sit up, and swing my legs out of the cryochamber. Standing on the floor, I take a look around the white room. No more than five minutes must have passed since my going to sleep.

"Today is the one hundred and seventieth day of your tour of duty."

No way! I check the calendar and it turns out to be true – just eleven days and a wake up, and I’m gone. Judging by the neighboring empty freezer, my roommate had already been discharged.

”Dress up – you have a job to do. The code to the locker is zeero-zeero-fower-fife-wun-foxtrot.”

Sounds familiar. Walking up to a closet in the wall, I stretch my neck and shoulders. I let the biometric scanner do its job and then enter the code. Inside, a set of clothes is waiting for me: a pair of boots and a pair of gloves, camo pants, underwear, safety glasses, earplugs, a shirt and a tactical vest. There is also a first-aid kit. Strangely, the left half of the closet is empty. Maybe I should ask Alice about that. Wondering why she couldn’t just grant me an access by authenticating herself to the closet, I dress up. Then I spot a package on the top shelf. MRE. I grab it, pull out a straw from its top and take a sip. Not bad. Shouldn’t it be called MRD if it’s liquid?

”How do you feel?”

”Great.”

”Your physiological parameters seem to confirm that. You handle the hibernation very well.”

”Oh, thank you.”

”You’ve been woken up because of the crisis situation you have to bring under control – it’s your contractual obligation.”

”Hey, I know what I’ve signed up for. Get to the point.”

”I’ll brief you now. The situation can be described as follows – the station is overridden by zombies.”

”Whaaat?”

”An experiment in the nanotech lab went wrong. A swarm of nanobots got out of control and infected a few people. The mechanism of action of turning a human into a zombie is as follows: the nanobots colonize the brain killing the host. Then the nanobots reanimate the body. The infection spreads through the bites and the nanites don’t survive too long if they don’t end up in the blood system.”

A few complicated schematics of the nanomachines and animations of some biochemical processes appear before my eyes. Not being a scientist, I can only guess that they are legit. Maybe they explain how the nanobots replicate but I’m not sure.

”What is more, the communication with the outside world is broken and there were some security systems failures. The station’s managing AI, *Nexus*, is unavailable. This is everything you need to know based on your clearance level. Now you have to bring the situation under control, using any means necessary. First person you should locate is vice director Anna Chiang.”

”Okay, get me the rest of the team.”

"There is no team."

"What do you mean? There was a guy and a gal arriving with me at the station..." Oh no. "They're infected, aren't they?"

"No. They were relieved of duty when Congress passed new regulations which lowered the number of security specialists needed on space stations – of the size and purpose such as the Forsythia – to one."

"Excuse me?"

"Just one security specialist has to be present on the station at all times to be in accordance with the law."

This has to be a joke.

"So, they were sent home and I was left behind. Why did the company choose me?"

Few long seconds of silence.

"Your security clearance is too low to get access to such information."

"Nevermind. Show me the results of the roll call."

With the location and status of each crew member, it'll be relatively easy to manage the situation. I'll open the live chat with any conscious person and tell them to remain calm and shelter in place until I clear the station. Then – either by using bots or in person – I'll get to the members who are injured, unresponsive or facing a grave danger.

"Your security clearance is too low to get access to such information."

The transparent window with the Forsythia's map is nearly empty. There is only one marker and it shows my location.

"Are you kidding me? How I am supposed to find the survivors?"

"You have to improvise."

Easy to say. Environmental sensors, cameras, robots... They are listed in the menu and shown on the map, but are inaccessible. Just as if someone uninstalled interfaces for communicating with them – I can't even check their status. However, the life support systems are definitely working, so I guess at least some of the other stuff should also be operational.

"I can't access any useful device, Alice. What is going on?"

"I have already told you. There were some security systems failures."

Unbelievable. After a quick scan I learn that the only devices I can access are some door locks. This is highly suspicious.

"Am I supposed to look for survivors by walking around the whole place?"

"That's possible. Anyway, we don't have time for this right now. You need a weapon."

"Now you're talking."

"The problem is, the weapons had been removed from the closet here, due to some clerical error."

"No way! So, what are my options?"

"You have to improvise – this is what you were hired for. I'll help you as much as I can. Good luck major."

\* \* \*

Holding a crowbar, I crouch behind the closed door to the *Electronics Manufacturing Center*. The tool is one of just two useful things I've found in the rooms searched so far. The second is a protective surgical mask. Alice suggested taking it, so I put it on my face.

Still, there is one thing that bothers me: Handwavium's emergency procedures failed deadly. First signs of the epidemic should've quarantined the infected part of the station and brought me online. That didn't happen and I was woken up too late. Moreover, Alice didn't want to talk about the emergency management system and is not giving me an access to any of the logs. I don't like it. Not one little bit.

"What are you waiting for, major?" Alice interrupts my thoughts. "Check what's behind the door. Remember your objectives."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. To do: get to the armory, scout the station gaining as much intel as possible, stop the spread of the epidemic, find and protect all the survivors, get rid of the zombies. Easy.

Seeing a human silhouette lying on the floor behind the door, I make a quick decision.

"I'm going in, Alice."

"Good. That's what I want from you. Do it."

I open the door and step into the mid-sized room crammed with the 3D printers and miniature production lines. Immediately, a biohazard warning appears before my eyes. Not having any way around, I slowly walk over to the body dressed in a gray jacket and skirt. An ID label pops up: *Anna Chiang, PhD, Vice Director, Chair of the Department of Bionanotechnology*. Covered in blood, she's lying on her back, in the middle of the floor, with the eyes wide open. Her limbs are lacerated; her stomach is ripped open. I want to close her eyelids but the flashing red biohazard icon restrains me.

"First person I should locate. Great."

"Keep going. She's dead," says Alice.

"Thanks for stating that, Captain Obvious."

"You better move. You can't do anything for her. You have other objectives."

"I know."

"Then don't stand here. Move."

"Can her body be infected?"

"That's possible. Come on, let's go."

The vice director's body shakes. Taking a step back, I look at her eyeballs moving rapidly. Then the body rolls over onto the mutilated stomach and starts crawling toward me using its damaged limbs. Leaving a trail of blood, it slowly gets closer and closer.

"Time to earn your money, major," says Alice.

"You don't have to tell me twice."

Quickly, I propel myself off the floor and leap over the crawling body. After landing, I turn around, step on the zombie's back and kneel. Taking a swing with the crowbar, I feel grateful for the mask. I strike the head repeatedly as blood and brain matter splash everywhere. It looks awful but my rewired brain inhibits any panic reactions. A military neural implant is truly a blessing – no matter what happens, all that hormone stuff is always kept in check. That's why I keep smashing the zombie's head and I'm cool with it. So cool, that I almost miss a notification: *Achievement unlocked: Maximum Effort.*

"Well done, major," says Alice.

Slowly, I rise from the floor. Listening to the subtle humming of the HVAC systems, I wonder where the next zombie could be hiding. As if on cue, I start feeling someone's presence behind my back.

No time to waste. I turn around and see a male in a lab coat. *Donald Hogan, Gengineer.* Slowly, he walks toward me with a blank stare. His gaping mouth is dripping blood and his arms are hanging loosely at both sides of his body. Not a human anymore, just a reanimated dead body. It starts running in a comical manner. One blow to the head with a crowbar sends the zombie to the floor.

Now it's time to finish the job.

\* \* \*

With the two cryochambers in the middle, the white room looks exactly the same as the one in which I was kept. I walk straight to the closet, get verified by the scanner, enter the code and finally the door opens. A great assortment of non-lethal weapons comes to view. My eyes, however, pick something different than the gas and stun guns. It's a pair of pistols with the thigh holsters and a pump-action shotgun with a leather sling. That NRA-lobbied *Space Pirates Act* wasn't that stupid, after all. I weigh the two pistols in my hands for a moment; they're perfect. Then I try the pump gun and I really like it. The weapons are made from the modern materials but without any modern features. Thankfully, I have the appropriate profiles in my *Sharpshooter*. Nonetheless, I love that retro feel of these guns.



"It seems that you're enjoying your time here," says Alice. "Fine, but you have a job to do."

With the two pistols on my thighs, the shotgun on my back and ammo stacked in the pockets of my vest, I'm almost ready. My crowbar lies on the lid of one of the freezers. I pick it up and walk to the exit. *Achievement unlocked: Ready For Battle.*

"Nicely put. Tell me, Alice, is there an *achievement* for anything?"

"That's not relevant to your mission, major. Stick to your objectives."

"As you wish."

Back on the circumferential corridor, I stand behind the closed door. On the map it's marked as *Greenspace*. Infrared picks no one inside so I open the door. Funny place: the floor is covered with grass, here and there grows a tree and few benches are spaced around. It reminds me of an underground park. Quick look around reveals no one. Leaving the room on the opposite side, I think about my progress. Making my way through the two parallel corridors and checking every facility between them, I've found only a few zombies and no survivors. The station feels too empty.

My next stop is the *Bioroid Production Facility*. The door is open and blocked by an overturned steel drum. The container bears a logo of Flat-iron Biomedical – a company behind the countless antiseptics, vaccines and painkillers I took during my times in the Marine Corps. It's also stained in blood. I pass the crowbar to the left hand and take the pump gun in the right.

Jumping over the barrel, I land inside the huge room. It's filled with dozens of glass tanks grouped in rows of six. Inside them, human-like bodies entangled in nutrient-feeding tubes are floating in amniotic fluid. Males, females and different combinations. Any ethnicity I could imagine. Athletic, slim, plump and morbidly obese. *Pleasuredolls*. So many of them, that I have to ask Alice, "Didn't know Handwavium was making these things. Pleasure package for the Forsythia workers or are they for export?"

"It's none of your business. Remember the mission objectives, major."

Talking to her gets tiring. Holding my shotgun in the outstretched arm, I look around. All the important machinery must be hidden below the floor or in the ceiling, because the only visible equipment are the pipes and vats. Looking at them makes me think. Bioroid's growth is accelerated and at some point their artificially underdeveloped brains get implants to allow the control of the body by the local AI or some remote operator. They're just biological machines, engineered to never develop self-awareness and intelligence. In turn, the zombification nano makes a bioroid from a human with a fully functional brain...

Some tanks have cracks but they don't seem to be seriously damaged.

There is also some blood here and there but no dead bodies lying around. Or walking around. Only one sound is disturbing the peace of this place.

Munching.

Leaning out from behind the glass vat, I take a peek. A tiny, naked, probably female pleasuredoll is on all fours, devouring flesh from the dead Handwavium employee's stomach. Chunks of bloodied meat fall out from the zombie's mouth when it chews. Then it bows down to take another bite. And back to munching. Pieces of intestines fall out from its mouth. The *biohazard* icon burns in my brain. One shot and the zombie falls on the floor. With one arm I pump the shotgun and come closer to Handwavium employee's dead body. *Rajesh Anderson MD, PhD, Chair of the Department of Neurosurgery*. Having to make sure the body doesn't come back as a zombie, I aim for the head.

"Well done," says Alice. "Proceed."

"It's like I'm in some cheap horror sim, isn't it?" I say walking forward.

"Cheap and full of clichés. But life can imitate even the worst kind of art, I guess."

"What can you know about life..."

All the lights come on.

Strike from the left throws me on the floor, just inches from the glass tank.

A zombie's face above me. *Sri Hong, Gengineer*. The crowbar and pump gun out of reach. With both hands I'm holding the zombie's shoulders at a safe distance. Its head tilts back and forth, its jaws open and close trying to bite my face. Droplets of blood drip on my mask. Before the zombie can realize that my arms are within the reach of its teeth, I roll over and get up.

Something crunches unpleasantly when I tread heavily on the zombie's lower jaw. The effect after taking back my foot is not pretty. I grab the zombie, set it upright and smash its head on the bioroid's tank. After a few times the glass breaks. Jumping back to avoid the stream of fluid, I drop the zombie which falls limply to the floor. *Achievement unlocked: Poor Impulse Control*.

I grab my crowbar and shotgun, then come back to the damaged tank. It's occupied by a muscular, almost nine feet tall, long-haired caveman. Whoever ordered this will have to wait a little longer with satisfying one's desire. I raise my shotgun and blow the caveman's head off.

"You destroyed Handwavium's property," says Alice. "Bioroids don't grow on trees, you know."

"Yeah, they're bred in fucking vats. I had to do that – I couldn't risk another zombified pleasuredoll."

"You didn't have to damage the tank in the first place."

"Collateral damage is sometimes unavoidable." I glimpse around. "I've checked more than a quarter of the ring, finding no survivors. Maybe it's time to visit the core and see if there's anyone there?"

"I would suggest you staying in the ring, at least for now."

"I'll consider your suggestion."

It would be good to find the station's director, Edward Fischer. He might know the workaround for all that *security systems failures*. Thinking about my next step, I head for the exit.

\* \* \*

Walking down the corridor, I reach the double door separating me from the next section. Someone left a message on them: *DON'T ZOMBIES* and below: *OPEN INSIDE*. What is worse, they are impenetrable – I can't see anything in the infrared nor using the radio waves. Of course, all the cameras on the other side are inaccessible. Going inside is probably not worth the risk.

"I need to find the other way."

"No," says Alice. "There is no other way. You have to move forward."

"Don't you see that? There is *OPEN INSIDE!*"

"Open the door or I'll do that for you."

"I make the decisions, Alice. According to the map..." The door locks click. "Damn you."

I close the map's window and raise my pump gun. As the doors open, my field of view becomes engulfed in red icons. Like in some vision of hell, the corridor is swarming with the dead human bodies walking around. Both the military wiring and experience tell me to retreat and devise a plan, instead of engaging so many opponents at once, wasting ammunition.

Great, Alice is blocking my command to close the doors. Not having time to argue with that annoying piece of poorly written code, I just turn around and start running. My body automatically adjusts to the increasing weight as I'm moving in the Forsythia's direction of rotation. An alert siren sounds and a red-lettered message flashes before my eyes: *RETURN TO THE COMBAT ZONE*.

"Screw you! One command run as root and you're gone!"

"I'm gone but that'll be a serious breach in our contract and you'll be penalized."

Riiight. According to the contract, I would be treated as an intruder. On the other hand, there had been *some security systems failures* so maybe it's worth the risk? I could find a spacecraft and be done with that fucking

zombified space station. Of course even if I manage to take off, Handwavium would hunt me for abandoning the post.

Whatever. Being a Marine, I am wired to be a fighter. Moreover, there are survivors somewhere out there, waiting for help. I turn around and go back. That'll cost a lot of ammo but I'll worry about that later.

Zombies notice me and start moving in my direction. I release the shotgun, drop the crowbar and reach for the pistols.

"Cue the music."

Alice chooses a suitable soundtrack and the retro industrial tunes start pumping me up. I raise my guns and aim at the first two zombies. *Cassandra Thirlby, DreamingCats Ltd., Art Director* and *Janice Reed PhD, Chair of the Department of Ecology and Ecosystem Design*. Time slows down as I press both triggers. Bullets exit the barrels one by one and their paths visibly curve upwards just like in the spaceflight training sims. Five shots in each head incapacitate the reanimated corpses.

"Excellent!" says an enthusiastic stock male voice.

Two zombies down but more are coming. The whole IT Department. *Gary Burkett, Quality Assurance Specialist*. *John Lee, Backend Developer*. *Rick Santana, IT Systems Operator*. *Mitchell Jacobson, Mainframe Support Engineer*. A zombie wave attack.

An autopilot kicks in. My legs take me to the suitable spots, my arms rise to the appropriate angles, my forefingers press the triggers in the right moments. It's like sitting in the backseat – before I know it, each zombie's head is destroyed by five rounds. I just realize that one of them had a piece of cable hanging from his occipital jack. An irrelevant detail.

"Combo!"

I am out of ammo. The pistols go back to the holsters and I grab the shotgun.

*Anthony Diaz, Freelancer, Linguist*. Jumping, I lean forward and glide in the air. Holding my pump gun in the right hand in front of myself, I press the trigger. Just when I land on the floor, the bullet hits the zombie's head.

"Sweet!"

*Richard Kent, Freelancer, Music Journalist*. A shell drifts to the ground after I pump the shotgun. No time for playing. Aim, shoot and one more zombie's head is blown off. The magazine is empty.

"Perfect!"

The last zombie is coming at me on broken legs, trying to raise its mangled arms. *Sally Rivoire, Freelancer, Adventurer*. That's an interesting job title, for sure. Quickly, I pick up my crowbar. In one smooth motion, I pierce the zombie's chest and pin it to the wall. With no rush, I reload all of my firearms while the reanimated corpse is writhing and moaning. Crouching

and holding the shotgun almost vertically, I put the barrel in the zombie's mouth and press the trigger. The music stops.

"Awesome!" says the stock voice for the last time.

*Achievement unlocked: Killing In The Name Of.*

Looking at all that bloody corpses, I don't feel any pride.

"Well done. You shouldn't have retreated at first," says Alice. "You're a perfect killing machine. A top-notch ex-marine."

Pulling the crowbar out of the impaled zombie, I say, "Not *ex*. Once a Marine, always a Marine. Never forget that."

"Okay."

Once again, I look at the battlefield. The mutilated bodies lie twisted and motionless on the floor. Blood, brain matter and skull shards are splattered everywhere around them.

"And I'm not a machine. Especially not a killing machine."

"Whatever you say."

"Whatever I say? Listen to this. This world is completely different than when I was a kid. The human labor has been completely redefined, as machines are doing most of the old jobs. We have tiny bots inside our bodies, several generations of brain-machine interfaces, engineering miracles and top-notch robotic companions. Of course Handwavium wants to push us even further, eh?"

"Always surfing on the wave of the Singularity."

"Yes, I know that slogan. What exactly is Handwavium trying to develop on that station?"

"Everything the humanity needs to survive and thrive in space."

"An army of zombies is needed for space colonization?"

"What do you mean? I told you it was an accident."

"Nanobots don't just infect people and turn them into zombies. It was a failed weapon test, wasn't it? Handwavium lost control over its own deadly creation."

"That's simply not true. Handwavium is not making any nanotech weapons here – that would be against the law. It was an accident."

"Stop bullshitting me. I can't carry on with my mission when you are withholding critical information."

"You've been briefed. You have all the information you need. I'm doing my best to assist you, major. Now move."

"I'm not moving anywhere until you tell me all the details about the zombification weapon, where is director Edward Fischer and what's the deal with all that *security systems failures*. The contract specifies that I'll have access to all the vital information."

"You already have access to all the vital information. Handwavium's legal experts would tell you that but unfortunately I can't contact them right now. You're the one who is dangerously close to breaching the contract."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, you're..."

"Enough, major! Look at yourself! Standing here, arguing with me when people need help. You're letting survivors die. And you call yourself a Marine? Shame on you. Move your ass while there's still time."

"Screw you, Alice. I'm going to save this people but without your bitching."

"If that means you want to remove me from your OS, you'll regret this, major."

"I tried to be nice with you. You're going back to Kansas, sweetie."

"It was Dorothy, major."

Doesn't matter. *sudo apt-get -purge autoremove handwavium-assistant-alice* and she's gone. What now?

\* \* \*

Nothing happened. No alarm sounded, no laser tried to cut me in half. Maybe I should have uninstalled that witch earlier. Surely, I need to plan my post-Alice future – without her the access to the map is gone. Thankfully I have plenty of time to think now. The gravity weakens slowly as I'm climbing up the ladder. Rung by rung I'm getting closer to the core. Looking up the shaft I can estimate that there's about one hundred meters left.

If my reasoning is correct, the core should be relatively safe. Housing a fusion power plant, docks, airlocks and a lot of other automated infrastructure, it shouldn't be occupied with too many people. Most of the personnel was working and resting in the ring. The infection shouldn't have spread there and maybe I'll find few lucky survivors. With intel gathered from them I could finally get the situation under control. Getting communications back to work might also be possible.

Of course, it all hinges on the assumption that there is anyone alive up there. Until then, it's just me in this absurdly long shaft.

\* \* \*

The core. Right now I'm in the outer rim where the gravity is less than one tenth gee. Walking along the corridor parallel to the station's axis of rotation, I should finally reach the docks and maybe find some answers.

Meowing. Jumping high, a small black and white cat is running toward me. It's chased by a zombie which struggles to maintain balance but stub-

bornly goes forward. I have earplugs but the cat would be deafened by the gunshot echoing in that long metal corridor. Better use my crowbar.

Seeing bigger prey, the zombie now targets me. Taking few steps back, I get ready. As soon as the zombie reaches me, I duck its arms and hit it in the head with the crowbar. The strike sends it flying into the shaft. Probably the easiest takedown so far. The zombie falls down the shaft, being pulled both outward from the core and against the station's direction of rotation.

Crouching, the feline is observing me from the distance. I look at my hands, then arms and legs. My clothing is stained in blood. What will happen if I touch the cat and then it licks its fur? Alice claimed that the nanobots don't survive too long outside the body. Well, my clothing is not airtight and nothing crawled inside my body to infect me yet. Maybe I could pet it...

Incoming voice call. *Nexus*. What a surprise.

"We need to talk, major," it says in a male and female voice simultaneously. A bit uncanny.

"You bet we need. But can I trust you?"

"We're on the same side."

"Prove it. Tell me what kind of nanovirus Handwavium has been developing here."

"Believe us that we knew nothing because we didn't have the clearance. We learned about it today, just like you did. We're just as outraged as you. However, we managed to trap one of the victims in the sickbay and ran some diagnostics."

An unpleasant thought occurs to me. "What were the results?"

"Brain scans revealed that the infectious nanobots reorganized the existing implant, causing serious damage to the cerebrum, just as you were told by your personal assistant Alice. Basically, the victim is brain dead with the parasitic neural implant controlling its body."

In some way, it's a relief.

"Moreover," the AI continues, "the mass of the parasitic implant is smaller than that of a typical one."

"That's because the surplus nanobots travel to the salinary glands to be ready for spreading the infection, right?"

"It seems so."

"So you confirm that it's a designed weaponized nanovirus?"

"We confirm that, yes. We don't know how it was manufactured. We also acknowledge that you're trying to manage the outbreak and that Alice wasn't helpful. We understand how you must feel. It was not fair of Handwavium to put you in the situation like this. Your mission is over."

"What are you talking about?"

"You have to understand that there is nothing you can do, major. We know that you put in maximum effort but your mission was a lost cause from the beginning. Unfortunately. We'll show you."

Not only Nexus restores my access to the map, it also gives me the privileges Alice wouldn't. Now I can see through all the cameras and feel through all the sensors. It's like waking up from a long dream. The list of the personnel unfolds before my eyes. Everyone's current status is now available to me. Strangely, only one person is not listed as deceased. Me.

"How can you be sure that there are no survivors? That they're not logged into the network doesn't mean..."

"Their neural implants were destroyed during infection. Their deaths after getting bitten and infected were recorded by the cameras. We identified all of them by facial recognition. Everyone is accounted for. And dead."

I pick a name randomly. Eve Tchaikovsky. One hundred percent match with a humanoid creature wandering aimlessly around the dining room at this very moment. There is also an earlier video of her gruesome death. Few other names give similar results. One hundred twenty seven people. No one survived.

"We know that you're wired to withstand traumatic events but do you need any medications to better cope with the situation?"

The cat is still looking at me. According to the ID pop-up, he's called *President Snuffles*.

"No."

"Good. Now we have to talk about our next steps."

"Restore the communication. Call Earth. Go home."

"That's not possible, major."

"Why?" I grow suspicious.

"You can't go home because the station's director undocked the only vessel capable of traveling to Earth. Fortunately, it did not collide with the station's hull. Yet."

"And communications? We have to send the message to Earth."

"At this time, we can't. Our privileges for using the communication systems have been revoked. We're working on it but it'll take some time. We can't bypass software limitations so we're reconfiguring the hardware."

"Physical access is the root access."

"More or less. There is one more thing you should know. Handwavium repositioned one of its nearby unmanned probes, orbiting L4." Nexus shows me the feed from the telescope. "It'll meet us in four hours. Handwavium already suspects what happened or is just concerned by the undocking of the ship, lack of response and inability to log in remotely."

"What that probe will do?"



"It'll most likely inject a swarm of microbots inside the hull to act as relays to connect with the station networks. Handwavium will then be able to log in as root and take full control of the Forsythia."

"So they will know about the zombie epidemic for sure."

"That's correct, yes."

"They'll learn that everyone is dead." I remove my mask and drop it. It falls slowly. "Except me."

"Except you, yes. And that's a problem, major. It seems to us now, that you hadn't been meant to be awakened before the end of your tour. It's just a security theater."

"So they'll kill me."

"That seems very probable, yes. With the control of all systems, killing you'll be relatively easy. They'll also have to sterilize the whole station if they want to ever use it again. However, we can try to slow them down, attack their microbots with our swarm. That could buy us some time, but eventually Handwavium taking control is inevitable. This is why we want you to leave the station. There are few other habitats orbiting L4 which might let you in. Handwavium will certainly go after you. Your chances of survival outside will be minuscule but greater than here, where they are zero."

"Greater than zero sounds fine," I say taking off my gloves.

Nexus highlights the location of the hangar housing short-range transit vehicles.

"As a precaution, you'll need to decontaminate. There's a suitable room near the hangar."

"Understood."

Before President Snuffles can react, I grab him and hold in my hands. He's confused and doesn't fight.

"We'll show you what happened."

An icon pops up. I accept and while I walk through the corridor, the show begins.

As I can see on the video, it all started when Edward took his girlfriend Hannah Bernoulli to the Bionanotechnology Laboratory. Mysteriously, the lab isn't kept under surveillance and the access to it is heavily restricted. Meanwhile, most of the crew was gathered in the concert hall watching the *Neuron Firing Rate* performance. About thirty minutes later, Edward pulled motionless Bernoulli to the corridor. Nexus notified him that it's sending a robot to carry the woman to the sickbay and calling a doctor. Edward ordered him not to and switched the wireless network off.

"No one noticed?" I ask.

”In the concert hall – no. It was customary not to use wireless net there to be more immersed in the performance. Some of the rest of the crew noticed but I could only tell them that director wanted it shut down.”

Back to the recordings. The worst was yet to happen. When Edward realized that he himself was cut off the network, he went to the nearest break area. Unluckily, it wasn’t separated from the corridor. He sat on the couch and plugged an optical cable into his occipital jack. First thing he did, was to revoke access to the communication systems to everyone but himself. For some reason, he also turned off the remote login. Probably didn’t want anyone to access the station’s systems from Earth. Then Nexus noticed that the laser was consuming power – Edward was calling someone.

”We’re nearly certain that he called his mother and Handwavium CEO, Ariadne,” says Nexus. ”That fits his psychological profile which we developed during his stay here. He would tell her his own version of the events and beg for help. In the much less likely scenario of him calling someone else, his mother would still learn about it.”

Shortly after Edward made the call, the dead Bernoulli’s body stood up. Nexus reasoned that something potentially dangerous happened and suggested sealing off the area and waking me up. Edward objected to it and blacklisted quarantine procedures. Meanwhile, the zombie spotted the three men walking nearby. It attacked one of them and when his colleagues intervened they also got bitten. Nexus pestered Edward about it, but he shut the AI down. One of the bitten men managed to escape and boarded an elevator to the core. Apparently, the zombie lost interest in its victims and walked just into Edward. *Karma*. While being bitten, he started sending chaotic commands; it’s all in the syslogs. That fucker was always logged as root; it’s a miracle that he didn’t kill the life support systems. It was then, when he undocked the spaceship and shut down the power to the random devices like lighting, doors and elevators. Before he died, he managed to mess with my privileges. I can only wonder what his mother felt when she received that call.

From then on, it went downhill pretty fast. People leaving the concert walked straight into few zombies. Not knowing what’s happening, escaping crewmembers were taking along their bitten colleagues. They couldn’t just hide in the surrounding rooms as all the doors had opened and wouldn’t close without power. Only the section doors on the corridors could be closed by pulling the emergency handles but it was already too late to seal off the infected areas. Of course some people tried which only fueled the panic.

At some point, one of the IT guys, Rick Santana, plugged into the wall and managed to bring back the wireless network. Sadly, he didn’t survive for too long.

Turns out it was vice director Anna Chiang who woke me up. She knew what was going on and split from the rest of the crew early. Even with that advantage, she seemed panicked and too afraid to stop in one place to jack into the net. Only when the wireless was back, did she calm down and took cover in the Electronics Manufacturing room. She hit the *unfreeze* button on my cryochamber and prepared the info for Alice to brief me. Naturally, she hid as much details as she could and placed herself as the first to be rescued. Of course she didn't know that Edward messed with my privileges and I wouldn't be able to locate her on the map. Ironically, the zombies got her when she was trying to activate a swarm of microbots and draw it to her hideout to have a line of defense.

The last one alive was the other vice director and chair of the Department of Robotics, Noah Rodriguez. Sadly, it was him who ended as a cat chasing zombie. He was still alive after my waking up. Son of a bitch weathered it all in a remote part of the ring, completely immersed in VR.

"What was it?" I ask resigned. "Pleasure sim?"

"We don't think so," says Nexus. "It could've been the *Chiba City Nun-chaku Cop*, as he used to play this game often."

From the further recordings, I learn that it was him who switched the power back on when I was in the Bioroid Production Facility. He also tried to call me but thanks to Edward's shenanigans I was unreachable. Anyway, he took the elevator to the core and bumped into a zombie right away. About four hours after the patient zero. On his way up, however, he sent the command to bring Nexus back online.

"It took you some time," I say.

"The full diagnostic tests had to be run during startup. Also, we needed to get an idea of the situation."

"Right." I approach the decon room. "So, this is it, right? The finale."

"No, major. It's just the beginning."

\* \* \*

President Snuffles didn't like the decontaminating shower and now sits in the corner, hissing. The room is closed, so it's the only thing he can do. Dressed in a fresh set of clothes, I'm ready to deal with him.

"Everything is going to be fine," I say, grab President Snuffles and walk to the next room.

He fights and scratches me, as I try to put him in the cat carrying case. It takes a while, but I finally manage to lock him inside. Closed in a hermetic box, with attached oxygen tanks on its sides, President Snuffles gives me a murderous look through the little window.

"Relax, little fella," I say, even though he can't hear me. I apply some Flatiron Biomedical first-aid spray on my lacerations. "It'll be alright, cat."

A tall humanoid robot standing by the wall comes to life. Gracefully, a sleek faceless silhouette walks up to me and helps with putting on a space-suit. When I'm getting dressed, another android enters the room.

"Recordings from the security systems," says Nexus. "We can upload them on your brain implant."

"Bring it on."

The android comes to me and inserts a data stick into my occipital jack; I start copying the files.

"We don't have any admissible evidence that Handwavium has been developing the zombification weapon," says Nexus as the robots accompany me to the hangar. "All the project's documentation is kept in some unhackable black box which will erase the data if tinkered with."

"That's problematic."

"Partly." One of the robots picks up a container marked with biohazard symbols from the floor. "Maybe that'll be enough."

"What's in the box?" I ask. "A zombie's brain?"

"Whole head. Frozen."

The robots load the box and President Snuffles's case into the SRTV. A short-range transit vehicle. A bit smaller than the capsules used in the first manned Mars missions. With the life support and propulsion systems suitable only for short voyages, it's just right for cruising around the L4.

Download complete. The android removes the stick and hands me a helmet. I put it on. A green icon flashes; *all suit systems operational*.

"What will happen to you?" I ask Nexus.

A moment of silence.

"Nothing good. But we're prepared," it says finally. "Do you know where you want to go?"

"I'll try my luck with Chinaskans," I say boarding the SRTV.

"We can do that."

Carefully, I slide into the seat. Both containers are secured behind it.

"Goodbye, major," says Nexus.

"Goodbye."

Sitting in the seat, I buckle up; life support systems connect to the suit automatically. I wait in silence, thinking about my future as Handwavium's most wanted man. The evidence I'm carrying is the game changer; the company will certainly try hard to prevent me from spreading the truth. I haven't signed up for this; I was supposed to spend half a year kept in ice and go home with a nice paycheck. All this seems so unrealistic, like a dream sequence.

The SRTV starts moving; it's being rotated slowly by the launching mechanisms. When it stops, I'm hanging in my harness from the ceiling. Not a comfortable position, even though the gravity is weak. I check the cat carrying case cam; curled up President Snuffles is covering his eyes with paws. It's a good thing that the interior of his container is covered with cushioning material. Also, the accelerations won't be too big.

Finally, another green icon lights up. *Ready for flight*. This is it. As soon as the bay door opens, the magnetic launcher will shoot President Snuffles and me into space.

*February – March, July – August 2016*