

## An Empty Virus

A massive cluster of scientists looked over the workbench. On it, vials and culture dishes littered the surface. To its side was one of the nano assembly fabs, its hazard screen reflecting white in the overhead lights. Clumps of workbenches and chemical, biological and nano assembly devices were scattered all over the massive room. They all felt the same eagerness as the lucky hand in the center, the individual's trembling but measured actions only serving to increase the excitement.

All over the facility, the other hands could feel it too, the thoughts broadcast clear as day. Discussion arose from somewhere and soon, regardless of what else they were doing, all the hands joined in. Some were wondering whether the experiment was merely doomed like the rest, others, more optimistic, fantasized of the future when connection could be grown rather than implanted. Some tried to give the hand advice on its task, cautioning about the placement of his syringe, asking it to double check the amount of stem cell solution.

For one of only a very few times in its life, the hand felt itself succumbing to mind panic, and hastily lowered the connection with the other hands. It needed to concentrate. It returned to the task at hand.

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Red light glared downward, dark and menacing as the hand ran breathlessly through the corridor. It gave commands to close the massive containment doors behind it as it ran, stopping for only the quickest amount of time.

Pain radiated both from the hands body, where he had slipped and fallen during the incident but also through the connection, other hands actively trying to run or defend themselves. There had been no time for the hands to think or come up with a centralized solution. At best, small groups coalesced across the facility as they all tried different ways to either stop the containment breach, or, in the case of the children and their protectors, flee the compound.

But it wasn't working. Any of it. The hand knew it. It could feel the desperation in the hands closest to the breach, and see how massively out of control the situation had gotten through their own eyes. Even more horrifying however was the sudden departure of hands, one by one from the connection, each silence incomprehensible to the others.

It closed the last door and looked down the hallway. It was alone in the section. Doorways gaped on either side of the corridor in front of it, but it knew the only way out was back the way it had come. The hand was deep in the facility, and even if it could have fit through the air filtration system, one of its first actions had been to seal that system off.

The hand backed slowly away from the door, glancing behind it at the dead end hallway. It urged the protectors to hurry with the children.

Suddenly, a hand shrieked through the connection, requesting assistance. The hand in the hallway forgot itself, like it its first years with the implant, and saw through the other's eyes.

The panel in front of it glowed red, like so many other things in the facility. The mental alarm from the device joining hundreds of other minds in the petrified hand's brain. For one brief second there was clarity, as senior members of the connection melded a course of action. The hand possessed, mental and even physical commands were entered at blinding speed to the reactor computer, actually reaching the

hardware limit of interpretable actions per second. Those with experience dashed from all across the facility towards the hand to help.

It was ok, the hand thought with the others, finding itself back in its body. The connection can fix this. There had been other containment problems previously, some even serious. It is what came with the line of work. That was why the facility was so far from the populace and why its hands were its own connection.

But the instinctual, biochemical fear, still present in the hands made its way out into the connection, growing in strength.

The children... The children had made it outside, but one of them and several of the protectors were injured by whatever it was that had caused the containment failure.

The hand felt the relief of the protectors as they scooped the younger ones onto the transport and hurriedly vectored it away from the facility. The relief mixed turbulently with its own dread, as it realized that it would not be joining them. There was nothing for it to do but...

A force reached out and flung the hand through the air. It smashed into the wall and crumbled at the impact. Its ears screamed at its brain a sound too loud to interpret. It smelled only burning, the burning of flesh and metal. Its eyes seared with light too bright to comprehend, as the first layers of skin were flayed off its body by pure energy.

The blast subsided.

Unconsciousness lifted. For the second time, pain. Only now, overwhelming, flooding the hand's body twisting it uncontrollably into shriveled spastic positions despite the multiple broken bones.

How long the agony continued, the hand could hardly tell, its consciousness recoiled multiple times, but always, implacably returned.

The crippled body stuck sickeningly to the concrete floor as the thrashing stopped.

The hand shot a look downwards. Its legs lay in heaps of broken limbs below it, bone extending through charred flakes of once skin. Blood congealed below it, affixing what was left of its body in place. And somehow it was still alive.

But as it realized this, a second more horrible realization occurred to it. It was alone. Not just locally, the wing had been empty when it arrived, but totally. The compound was... silent. The connection was silent. Never before had it experienced such a thing. Its mind struggled to comprehend it. The departure from the populace was nothing like this, it hit the hand mentally far harder than the blast had, tumbling his thoughts downward into a deep fathomless spiral. Alone.

Its implant must be broken, of course, in the blast. It happened to some. Malfunctions, accidents. It was one of the reasons why their project had been so important. Those that lost connection usually survived, and some even were able to regain their sanity and allowed a new implant. But most pleaded, begged to be killed. Alone.

When it was a child, too young for its nascent memories to be recalled clearly, it had lived a separate

life. It thought it could remember the silence. But along with the silence had been the compassion of the protectors and the unending interaction with the other children. This was... Alone.

Despite the hand's injuries, it started to shake again. Alone. No thoughts, no visions, no emotions, no sensations, nothing. Nothing. Nothing. So alone. So Alone. Tears streamed uncontrollably from its burned eyes, its mind recoiling again and again at the realization. Alone. But nowhere to go, no one to help it. To help it know what to do...

Alone. At least alone, a coherent thought emerged in the vast emptiness of its mind. The thing that had caused the containment breach had undoubtedly been destroyed. And for one brief second, it was glad of the reactor meltdown. Glad that the others had died in the blast. Glad that they hadn't shared the same fate as their comrades closest to the breach when it happened.

The hand was no longer part of the connection, but its mind still remembered after images of the others thoughts, and in this misty not quite real memory, it recalled the force that had destroyed the other hands. The horror as their limbs dissolved, as their...

But it didn't matter. The hand actually smiled, an affectation left from when the hand were merely human, it conscious retreated towards the comfort of insanity. It was Alone. It would die here. Alone. The children had escaped. Their protectors would inform the true collection of what had happened. Here they would find...Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

And yet... Something caught the hand's attention from the destroyed remains of the last containment door, now sundered open, choked with debris. A change in the shadowing left by the somehow still functioning lights? No. Something slipped over the twisted pieces of metal, a grey and tan swirl. An oil slick on the surface of the concrete now, burbling ever closer.

The hand's eyes watched, unable to look away, fear growing until it actually overwhelmed the pain. The hand's consciousness receding as pure panic forced its way into where its thought normally resided. Pure, animalistic fear, body hemorrhaging endorphin laced blood. It drew closer. It was on the hand now, its slurry of dislocated organics and fiendish nanobots rippling along the hand's body, eating away at the sustenance. All semblance of individuality, rationality, higher thinking was shredded.

What was once the hand cohered on some imperceptible microscopic level, the imprint of its memory laced organics combining implicitly with the nanobots which still carried some information of the implants they had come from, what they were supposed to have made.

As what was once the hand gained a level of thinking a new untold level of fear imbued its consciousness, unfettered by physical limitations, chemicals or actual reactions, emulated seamlessly between the nanobots and the organic slurry around them. The death echos of the other hands were here as well. Screaming. In unison. It joined them. Not even in death it seems, could it be alone.